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# International Observers Assess Georgia Presidential Election Positively

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International observers' assessment of Georgia's January 5 presidential election is substantially positive. More than 1,000 international observers, long-term and short-term, were on hand. This is almost certainly an all-time high ratio to a country's population for any election in former Soviet-ruled countries. The Georgian government and parliament had appealed to international organizations and parliaments to send the maximum possible number of observers to assess the integrity of the process.

The observation missions of the OSCE/ODIHR (Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights), the OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), and the European Parliament issued their joint Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions on January 6. It assessed the election as 'in essence consistent with most OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections... This election was the first genuinely competitive presidential election, which enabled the Georgian people to express their political choice.'

The joint conclusions assessed Georgia's recently amended electoral code as adequate; the operations of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and local electoral commissions, as open and transparent; and the Georgian authorities' attitude toward the observer missions as cooperative. The assessment further commended the voter education campaign through national media and the training of election officials; the accreditation of a large number of domestic non-party observer groups; the publication of election material in the languages of Georgia's ethnic minorities; and Parliament Chair Nino Burjanadze's (interim head of state during the campaign) initiative to create an Inter-Agency Task Force for Free and Fair Elections to liaise with observer organizations and address concerns raised.

At the same time the assessment noted 'significant challenges that need to be addressed urgently.' As a substantive shortcoming it identified the 'sometimes blurred distinction' between state activities and the Saakashvili campaign, which 'contributed to an inequitable campaign environment.' As procedural and organizational shortcomings, it mentioned inconsistencies in the finger-inking procedure (a safeguard against multiple voting) and poor organization of the vote counting. Slow counting in some precincts, as well as snowfall causing power outages, is delaying the announcement of the final countrywide returns by the CEC.

The joint conclusions acknowledged Georgia's 'diverse media environment, generally enabling freedom of expression and offering voters a wide range of political views. ... Talk shows, televised debates, and allocation of free airtime enabled voters to become familiar with candidates ' platforms.' Implicitly criticizing pro-government television channels for coverage slanted toward National Movement candidate Mikheil Saakashvili, the assessment also noted that the pro-opposition Imedi Television was abandoned by part of its staff and closed temporarily by its management in connection with the coup plot of Imedi's owner, Badri Patarkatsishvili.

Georgia's government pledged on January 6 to fully and effectively address the concerns in the observers' preliminary conclusions and final reports. Those final reports are normally due in two months after an election. In

Georgia's case they will coincide with the campaign for parliamentary elections, which are likely to be held in April -- unless the opposition derails that calendar by rejecting the presidential election.

Fixated (by long-established practice and format) on the electoral process as such, the four organizations' assessment had nothing to say about presidential candidate Patarkatsishvili's attempt to hijack the election and the country through his wealth and ultimately through violence. While noting that the Saakashvili campaign was often combined with social welfare programs, the joint assessment ignored Patarkatsishvili's campaign promises to spend more than \$1 billion of his own wealth for social programs, if elected. It equally ignored main opposition candidate Levan Gachechiladze's promise to disburse that amount for social programs from his ally Patarkatsishvili, if Gachechiladze were elected president.

Noting the campaign's 'highly polarized political environment,' the assessment does not mention the opposition leaders' resort to the language of hatred and politics of brinkmanship in this electoral campaign -- indeed >From the outset of its demonstrations to force anticipated elections. By contrast, the Saakashvili campaign largely reflected its protagonist's personal style, jovial and optimistic. Throughout these events, Western representatives in general (including electoral observers) made no serious attempt to discourage the opposition from using inflammatory language and threats.

The hate factor among small parties' leaders more than any other single factor distorted this campaign, setting it apart from all the elections held in former Soviet-ruled countries in the last decade. As Davit Darchiashvili, head of the Open Society-Georgia Foundation, observes, hate speech is a problem of political culture in Georgian society, reflecting immaturity of parts of its political class (Mze TV, January 6). Meanwhile, opposition's supporters behaved correctly despite their leaders' incendiary rhetoric during the campaign. However, the risk of destabilization will be high in the coming days.

International Election Observation Mission [OSCE/ODIHR, OSCE/PA, PACE, European Parliament], 'Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions,' January 6; Civil Georgia, Messenger, Rustavi-2 TV, January 5-7)

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