
Lincoln Mitchell the US expert on Georgia Saakashvili's claim on a mandate is much weaker

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The leading American expert on Georgia, Lincoln Mitchell, Assistant Professor in the Practice of International Politics at the Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University, says that the results of the presidential election give the real opportunity for the opposition. In 2002-2004, during the Rose Revolution in Georgia, Mr. Mitchell was a chief of party for the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Tbilisi. He shares his views on the outcome of the voting and further developments in the country with DMITRY GORNOSTAEV, RIA Novosti New York Bureau Chief.

- Can you suggest that any of the candidates, especially Mr. Gachechiladze, were viable competitors to Mr. Saakashvili?

- Ultimately, only Mr. Gachechiladze was able to pose a serious threat. At this writing there are no final results so it is not clear whether or not there will be a runoff, but if there is one it will be between Saakashvili and Gachechiladze. I think Gachechiladze was the strongest opposition candidate largely because he was seen as the coalition candidate with the broadest base of support. This speaks to a maturation of the opposition in Georgia.

- What do you think about the opposition's claims that this election was stolen? Is their call to the people to protest the official results at the street rally legitimate and reasonable?

- It is tough to say whether or not this election was stolen, particularly because we don't yet have final results. However, there are two major problems here. One is the use of administrative resources by the government and the bias in media coverage during the pre-election period. Both of these phenomena have been widely reported elsewhere so I won't get into it here. The second is that although the election day itself went reasonably well, there were enough minor problems that in a very close election they add up to making a difference.

While this was not a very close election between the candidates, the question of whether or not there will be a runoff will be decided by a few percentage points, so the minor fraud may have made the difference.

I think the opposition's decision to call for demonstrations is legitimate, although I would suggest they hold a day or two of peaceful rallies to register their protest and then move on. While the opposition may have lost, it is a huge victory in some respects.

Saakashvili is no longer the president with 96% of the vote. He is the president with 52% of the vote, or whatever the final number will be. His claim on a mandate is much weaker. It will be much more difficult for him to govern without input from people outside his party. Moreover, parliamentary elections are just around the corner and this is the real opportunity to bring more representation and voices to the political process in Georgia.

- Could the rally turn into unrest or the outcome will end the political crisis in Georgia?

- I don't know what will happen here. I believe the best thing for Georgia is for both sides to move on. Dwelling on this election does not really get the opposition anything.

- The New York Times cited the opposition claiming that the government had made a "carousel" voting with the buses carrying Saakashvili's supporters from one polling station to another. Could this allegation be true and if so, could this affect the outcome of the voting count?

- As I said before, the minor, by the standards of much of the region, election day violations may add up to the difference of whether or not there is a runoff, but it is not easy to know that for certain.

- Will this election change a balance of the external influence on the situation in Georgia, bearing in mind a contradiction of interests of Russia and the United States in the Caucasus region?

- I don't think so. Gachechiladze and Saakashvili both would continue to push Georgia in the same direction.

- Will the result of the referendum on Georgia entering NATO speed up the process of its integration into the Alliance?

- I am not a NATO expert, but I would interpret the referendum results as having a modest but positive impact on Georgia's bid for NATO membership.
