

ELECTIONS IN ETHNIC MINORITY REGIONS:

Analysis of key tendencies and practices



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The local self-government elections of October 2, 2021 were held in Georgia against the background of certain agreements reached with the participation of international organizations, the conditions engendered by the pandemic, and a growing political crisis. The return to Georgia of the third president of the nation, Mikheil Saakashvili, and his subsequent arrest, had a significant impact on both the election day and the political processes. According to preliminary data from the CEC, the ruling Georgian Dream party crossed the 43% threshold imposed by the April 19 agreement, reaching 46.6% of the total vote share. However, in almost all major cities (Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, Rustavi and Zugdidi) the ruling party failed to reach 43% of the vote share. In addition, Georgian Dream achieved the highest results in the minority-populated regions of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti.

The attainment of good election results by the ruling party in minority-populated regions is not the exclusive achievement of Georgian Dream. Nefarious practices for achieving high results were used by almost all previous governments. Yet, this was often explained by the low political awareness of non-dominant ethnic groups, their weak participation in public life, and even their lack of knowledge of the state language. This document is an attempt to analyse the main challenges, problematic approaches and the distinct environment within which Georgian citizens from non-dominant ethnic groups have to make their political choices.

The document was prepared by the staff of the Social Justice Center on the basis of observations of the election processes in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions during the pre-election period and on the election day itself.

Pre-election period

An analysis of the political party manifestos¹ prepared by the Center for Social Justice shows that party manifestos and platforms were not focused on the concerns, challenges, and needs of the local population. In assessing the pre-election period in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, we must not overlook the broken relationship between the local political elite (including the political parties and the local self-government) on the one hand, and the general population and the clan government on the other, which often increases mistrust and a nihilistic attitude towards political processes on the part of ethnic groups. There have been no serious attempts by political parties and candidates to solve this problem for many years. Moreover, it could be said that the local political elite often promotes and deepens this reality through their own decisions, emphases and rhetoric. Neither of the ruling party's candidates for the position of city mayor were available for public debates or critical questioning, whereas the opposition candidates appealed to the so-called referendum and paid less attention to local needs. In the pre-election period, the candidates on the lists of opposition parties and candidates from

¹ Analysis of parties' pre-election manifestos from the perspective of the needs of ethnic minorities, available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/partiebis-tsinasaarchevno-programebis-analizi-etnikuri-umtsiresobebis-sachiroebbis-perspektividan>

majoritarian constituencies refused to run in the elections for various reasons. In both regions, decisions over party proportional lists and majoritarian candidate selections were made individually or by a small group of people, without the involvement of the population.

In discussing the ongoing political processes in Kvemo Kartli during the pre-election period, four symptomatic events should be highlighted. The first is a confrontation between the UNM headquarters and local leaders in Marneuli (and later in Bolnisi), after which one of the leaders of the United National Movement in Marneuli, Azer Suleimanov, left the party. The local leaders boycotted the October 2, 2021 elections and did not support their own party. One of the reasons for this controversy was Ayaz Mammadov's joining of the United National Movement, and the discussion of his candidacy for mayor of Marneuli.² The non-inclusive process for compiling the party list was referred to as the reason for the controversy between the UNM central office and local leaders in Bolnisi.

The second event was the launch of a criminal case against the family member of a local businessman in Gardabani and a search of his family carried out in connection with this. The businessman linked this event to his critical and active role on social networks. It is noteworthy that the businessman also held a press conference with local media on the issue and asked various activists to support him and his family.

The third, and perhaps noisiest incident was a physical confrontation in the village of Gantiadi, Dmanisi, when the son of a ruling party majoritarian candidate stabbed two pro-UNM activists with a knife at the pre-election campaign meeting.³ This controversy significantly damaged pre-election activism and work in Dmanisi Municipality and once again pushed the needs and challenges of the local population into the background.

The fourth symptomatic tendency is that the pre-election processes in Samtskhe-Javakheti were passive and weak. During this period, cases of intimidation, pressure and threats were identified in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki. Opposition parties often spoke out against their candidates being pressurized, and about party members being forced to leave the party. The main challenge for the pre-election campaign was the alleged bribery of voters. Unauthorized persons were actively involved in the campaign. Local public officials, NEPL staff, and members of the local election commission attended the campaign meetings during working hours.⁴ The involvement of public school principals and teachers working in favor of the ruling party was also exposed. The process of recruiting the members of the local election commission was largely formal.

² A press conference organized by UNM, July 30, 2021, is available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnv51V-N2Ns>

³ Article by Radio Liberty, September 22, 2021, available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31472254.html>

⁴ The Second Interim Report on the Monitoring of the Official Pre-Election Period of the 2021 Local Self-Government Elections is available at:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RfWnCj3_vklWBsW9IOyIZGgYcIT4LUSW/view?fbclid=IwAR1e02TQqFA9V1MQTViY7WWoS0KhgBIWDj6tULGkd4-JmD9wSDhr6Qw0BXQ

Election day

On election day, the Social Justice Center in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti operated in the municipalities of Marneuli, Gardabani, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda. The main political representatives in Kvemo Kartli were Georgian Dream and The United National Movement, while in the Samtskhe-Javakheti municipalities Georgian Dream, The United National Movement, European Georgia and Gakharia for Georgia have each been competing in the election. In both regions, the Georgian Dream candidates running for mayor's position won the first round. In the above-mentioned municipalities of Kvemo Kartli, no other political party managed to cross the 3% threshold, except for the political party Progress and Freedom in Dmanisi, which was allocated one council member. In Akhalkalaki, European Georgia and Lelo also crossed the threshold alongside Georgian Dream and The United National Movement; and "Gakharia's Party" and European Georgia crossed the threshold in Ninotsminda alongside Georgian Dream and The United National Movement. According to the preliminary results of the elections in each municipality, the ethnic composition of the city council is as follows:

Marneuli City Council: 21 representatives of non-dominant ethnic groups and 12 representatives of dominant groups (minority participation increased by 4 representatives).

Bolnisi City Council: Representatives of 15 non-dominant ethnic groups and representatives of 21 dominant groups (minority participation increased by 2 representatives).

Dmanisi City Council: 9 representatives of non-dominant ethnic groups and 21 representatives of dominant groups (minority participation decreased by 2 representatives).

Gardabani City Council: 14 representatives of non-dominant ethnic groups and 22 representatives of dominant groups (participation of minorities decreased by 1 representative).

Akhalkalaki Sakrebulo: 35 representatives of non-dominant ethnic groups and 7 representatives of dominant groups (participation of minorities increased by 4 representatives).

Ninotsminda City Council: 30 representatives of non-dominant ethnic groups and 0 representatives of dominant groups (participation of minorities increased by 5 representatives).⁵

To summarize, one may say that the representation of non-dominant ethnic groups in the locally elected bodies in both Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti has slightly increased. More specifically, a significant increase was observed in Akhalkalaki and Marneuli municipalities. The participation of minorities in Bolnisi and Dmanisi municipal councils, on the contrary, has decreased. It should also be noted that the increase in the number of minorities in Akhalkalaki was caused by the increase in the total number of members of City Council from 38 to 42, and the increase in the number of minorities in the Marneuli Municipality City Council could be attributed to the active work and criticism on the part of local activists and civil society organizations. In addition, the participation of women

⁵ These are data calculated by the Social Justice Center and may not fully reflect the final results of the CEC.

representing ethnic minorities in the city councils has increased and although in 2017 there were no women representing minorities in the Marneuli Municipality, following the 2021 elections, there will be 5 women representing ethnic minorities in the Marneuli City Council.

In both Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, election day was characterized by: (1) cases of violence on election day; (2) informal governance by non-local “observers” at polling stations; (3) the conspicuous power of local election commission members; (4) the mobilization of government supporters near polling stations; (5) elections in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki being particularly “quiet”; (6) the excessive visibility of SSSG and police officers in some polling stations (7) the political manipulation and instrumentalization of voters by political parties; (8) the fact that, in the two majoritarian constituencies of Ninotsminda, only the Georgian Dream nominated a candidate, (9) the fact that, despite all this, support for the opposition increased in ethnic minority areas.

- (1) **Cases of Violence on Election Day:** During the October 2 elections, Kvemo Kartli, and in particular Marneuli Municipality, was the only place where information about violence and controversy was disseminated through national and local media. The controversy occurred in the village of Kizilajilo in Marneuli, which, according to the opposition, was caused by a supporter of the Georgian Dream who attempted to vote several times. Also, the wounding of a member of the Labor Party was recorded at the 52nd polling station in Marneuli. According to Transparency International Georgia, of all the problems observed across Georgia on election day, the greatest number were observed in Marneuli.⁶
- (2) **Informal governance by non-local “observers” at polling stations:** During our work, we have repeatedly noted that the ongoing processes in the polling station were conducted not primarily by the chairperson of the Precinct Election Commission (PEC), but by a non-local observer or a member of the commission. There have been frequent instances where a specific breach or error has been rectified after reference has been made to that person. Prior to making important decisions, the chairperson of the commission addressed or questioned this person, in response to which he continued or changed the action accordingly. All the members of the commission were aware of such informal governance and they addressed this person instead of the chair of the commission to resolve any issues.
- (3) **The conspicuous power of PEC members:** The vast majority of PEC members are local teachers, who are distinguished by their authority and power in the area. There were frequent cases when members of the commission openly directed voters to support a particular party when they came to the polling station. It should be especially noted that the members of the commission in different polling stations told us that they view their power positively, and the leadership of any political team is obliged to recognize their power. They believe that they have the resources to influence the election results within the polling station. As a result, their role in the victory of any political team is crucial. The power of the commission members was also manifest in the process of counting votes, when the invalid status of the ballots was subjectively

⁶ Article of Radio Marneuli, October 6, 2021, available at:

<https://www.marneulifm.ge/ka/siakhleebi/article/48658-archevnebze-saqarthvelos-masshtabith-yvelaze-meti-problema-marneulshi-iyos-aerthashoriso-gamtcvirvaloba-saqarthvelo->

accepted by the commission without the application of a uniform standard. It should be noted that a significant number of invalid ballots were unsigned and / or without a stamp, and in our observations, this only applied to pro-opposition ballots. It is noteworthy that in several polling stations in Gardabani Municipality the “badges” of some observers were forged, allowing unauthorized persons to be present at the polling station.

- (4) **Mobilization of Government Supporters at Polling Stations:** As a result of the agreement reached with the participation of international organizations and as a result of electoral reforms, many new regulations and restrictions were imposed, including a ban on gatherings within a 100-meter radius of polling stations. However, according to our observations, this regulation was not entirely effective in Kvemo Kartli region. Outside almost all polling stations the supporters of the ruling party influenced the will of the electorate, and representatives of other observer organizations told us that “everything happens outside the polling station before a voter enters it”. It is noteworthy that local police were actively working in several polling stations to disperse similar rallies and gatherings near the polling station. Police in various polling stations in Gardabani and Marneuli municipalities also urged locals to leave the polling station, but local representatives and supporters of the Georgian Dream often refused to leave. In Gardabani, our staff witnessed the fact that after the police called people to leave the area a representative of the Georgian Dream, who was registered as a majoritarian candidate in one of the polling stations, called an unknown person on the phone and informed him/her about the situation and the police request after which police stopped attempting to disperse the gathering. In Ninotsminda we witnessed an event when, in one of the precincts, the chairman of the precinct commission called on the agitators to find specific voters on the lists. After our warning the agitators left the area. However, the chairman of the precinct election commission, dissatisfied with all this, publicly stated, “Where are the agitators, why do they not help people to find themselves on the lists, did we pay them so much money for doing nothing?”⁷
- (5) **The elections in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki were particularly “quiet”:** in our opinion, the reason for the peaceful elections in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki municipalities was the non-competitive political environment in the region. From our observations, the local representation of almost all the opposition parties was marked by half-hearted, nominal and insincere work. One might often feel that the local opposition (including the United National Movement) was allied with members of the ruling party and did not really create an alternative political perspective and experience in the area. This suggests that neither Akhalkalaki nor Ninotsminda had a healthy election process. Attempts to create an alternative (mainly the work of Gakharia's party) were halted before the election by putting pressure on or intimidating candidates.
- (6) **The excessive presence of SSSG and police in some polling stations:** Although violence at polling stations or the mobilization of local leaders of the ruling party was often not fully controlled by the police, SSSG and police power and presence at election polling stations were intense on

⁷ Jnews material, October 2, 2021, available at:

<https://ka.jnews.ge/?p=18857&fbclid=IwAR2l2B5HVNAR1zMvkzjkmlqIWakZaRYMQFmex1V1oBf39l62m4fGJOZKVEE>

election day. The special mobilization of security services was observed in Dmanisi and Marneuli municipalities. In Dmanisi, SSSG vehicles (with tinted windows) allegedly drove non-stop throughout the day between ethnic Azerbaijani villages and polling stations, which seems unusual considering the usual daily life of these villages. Following the elections in Marneuli, in almost all the polling stations where we attended, the vehicles of law enforcement agencies (but not patrol cars) were standing in front of polling stations. According to our observations, Bolnisi Municipality was an exception in this regard. However, this may be explained by low political competition in that municipality.

- (7) **Political manipulation and instrumentalization of voters by political parties:** In Kvemo Kartli, the political manipulation and instrumentalization of voters by political parties, both by the government and the opposition, forms part of everyday life. The problematic narrative of local representatives of the ruling party, PEC members and local authorities is of particular significance, as it aimed to strengthen nihilistic attitudes towards the elections. Views such as “we cannot change anything anyway”, “no one asks us”, etc. were often heard. It is unfortunate that the mainstream narrative often attributes the existence of such attitudes to the weak participation of citizens, yet, our observations demonstrated that such sentiments are often fueled by government supporters. On the other hand, one may note the problematic work of the United National Movement in Kvemo Kartli, which was characterized by the objectification of local leaders and a disregard for their opinion. As a result, shortly before the election, a local United National Movement team in Marneuli and Bolnisi refused to run in the election, minimizing opposition results in the region. The high results of the United National Movement in Dmanisi municipality can be explained by the cooperation of the local economic clan with the opposition.
- (8) **In the two majoritarian constituencies of Ninotsminda, only the Georgian Dream had a candidate:** in the majoritarian constituencies of Eshtia (Eshtia, Kaurma, Toria, Uchmana) and Gandza (Gandza, Saghamo), the opposition parties did not have a candidate in the majoritarian constituency and the Georgian Dream candidate participated in the elections without competition. It should be noted that in the Eshtia constituency, the party Gakharia for Georgia had nominated a candidate. However, before the election, the wife of the candidate, Hovhannes Ovsepien, Guyane Ovsepien, informed the party that if her husband ran in the election, she would have been dismissed from teaching at school and their family would get into trouble. There were similar difficulties in forming party lists.
- (9) **Despite all, support for the opposition has increased in ethnic minority regions:** A comparison of the results of the 2021 and 2017 local elections shows that despite the challenges listed above, support for the opposition among ethnic minorities has increased. In particular, compared to 2017, in Marneuli, Gardabani, Bolnisi and Dmanisi, the opposition respectively received 4.72%, 14.13%, 12.54% and 26.3% more votes. However, opposition support in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda decreased by 15% and 4.34%, respectively.

Despite the general tendencies, according to our observations, the political processes and the behavior of the voters in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti were not the same. In Kvemo Kartli, despite the tense situation, the political process is more dynamic and diversified. The opposition has relatively

more and longer representation and support in this region. On the other hand, the political processes in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region are weak and passive. Samtskhe-Javakheti is also very weak in terms of civic activism compared to Kvemo Kartli, and the local activist groups, self-organizing practices, and community leaders in Javakheti remain largely invisible.

To summarize we may say that the electoral behavior of voters from non-dominant ethnic groups is different from the rest of Georgia due to various factors, and an in-depth study of these factors will probably require more detailed and long-term observation. However, observations of pre-election violence as well as the incidents that took place on election day, and incidences of intimidation and pressure, the activities of some commission members, the excessive presence of the SSSG and police, and the political manipulation and instrumentalization of voters and local leaders by political parties show that the relatively high performance of the ruling party in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti is the result of long-standing systemic challenges and the systematic exclusion of ethnic minorities, and this reality requires long-term work and political agreements focused on political and social change.

It is important to create real conditions for democratic participation and inclusion in regions populated by ethnic minorities, and for the ruling political parties to abandon the political manipulation and instrumentalization of these regions and their peoples, which remains one of the central political reasons for the peripheralization, backwardness and control of these regions. At the same time, it is fundamentally important that the work of political parties in these regions shifts from electoral self-interest to an interest in transforming these regions for the benefit of the electorate, and that they realize the importance of more serious and day-to-day political work in the area to enhance integration and promote social change.