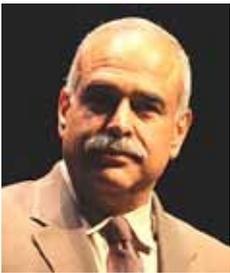


Caucasus ELECTIONSWATCH

A weekly review of elections related processes in the Caucasus Region

06 November 2012

Who will challenge Serzh? Political repositioning ahead of February 2013 Presidential elections in Armenia.



A second candidate has announced his intention to contest the February 2013 Presidential elections in Armenia. Raffi Hovannisian, leader of the opposition Heritage Party, declared on Friday his decision to challenge incumbent President, and member of the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), Serzh Sargsyan in three months time.



"I declare today my nomination in the upcoming presidential election," announced the former Foreign Minister of Armenia.

Hovannisian, who was born in the United States, has been barred from running in previous presidential races as he did not meet the requirement in the Armenian electoral code that presidential candidates must have possessed Armenian citizenship for at least ten years before

they are eligible to run for the country's highest office. The Heritage Party leader served as independent Armenia's first Foreign Minister following the collapse of the Soviet Union from 1991-1992. Ten years later, Hovannisian founded the Heritage Party in 2002 and has been elected a member of parliament for the party both in 2007 and in 2012. In September of this year he resigned his seat in Parliament with the intent to run for the presidency. The Heritage Party currently has five seats in Parliament.

"I am doing this as a citizen of the Republic of Armenia who has the will and feels his share of responsibility for today's situation and wants to participate in overcoming this situation," stated the newest addition to the Presidential race.

Hovannisian invited "the intellectuals, activists, the political parties, all Armenians who believe that Armenia is not [the] property of one person [...] to participate in the Presidential elections." He invited "all those who want to see a country which has [democratic] values" to get involved and be active during the campaign period.

"This country," he affirmed, "is not a one party state. It belongs to the people." Hovannisian continued that he hoped the presidential elections will meet "Armenian, not international standards."

The Heritage Party leader stressed during his announcement that he will "stand for president only once and never again."

Despite rumours to the contrary, Hovannisian remains just the second candidate to announce his entrance into the upcoming presidential race. President Serzh Sargsyan, the RPA has explained, will be confirmed in a special party convention on 15 December, endorsing his bid for re-election.

The greatest cloud of uncertainty is hanging over the decision of the Prosperous Armenia Party (PAP). Will they run a candidate in the forthcoming elections, and if so, who? Media outlets in the country were reporting last week that the PAP had reached an agreement to support Sargsyan in the upcoming elections. Naira Zohrabyan, a member of the PAP dismissed the announcement as false information.

"Prosperous Armenia will announce its decision when the party members consider it necessary," Zohrabyan told reporters.

The PAP, of course, initially signed a memorandum on 17 February 2011 with the RPA and Orinats Yerkir to form a political coalition. Following the May 2012 parliamentary elections, the PAP, however, left the coalition and revoked its support for the RPA. According to the PAP, the decision to leave the coalition automatically suspends any commitment they had to support the re-election of Sargsyan. It is still unclear who will represent the PAP should they decide to contest the elections, though speculation surrounds both PAP leader, Gagik Tsarukyan and ex-Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian are the most likely candidates.

Similarly neither the opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC) nor the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) have announced whether or not they will field a candidate for the presidency. The leader of the ARF, Armen Rustamyan, however, hinted that the ARF would not participate in the presidential race, after describing the parliamentary elections held in May as being "predetermined" through fraudulent practices.

"If there are similar violations during the presidential election, what is the point of this election? If elections are not for changing power, for the expression by citizens of their will, then they are meaningless. It is quite possible that we generally will not participate in the elections," said Rustamyan. ■

Report prepared for CEW by Karina Gould with additional reporting from the Armenian press.

Caucasus Elections Watch is a specialised weekly publication focusing on elections related processes in the Caucasus, with news and analysis compiled by experts with long experience of the region.

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Yerevan

The Gallup Institute released on 2 November the first round of poll results with regard to the presidential race in Armenia.

At a press conference, Aram Navasardyan, the Armenia director for Gallup International, revealed that in response to the question, "who would you vote for if the elections were held next Sunday?" 28 percent of eligible voters would support incumbent President Serzh Sargsyan, 19 percent would support PAP leader Gagik Tsarukyan and 11 percent would support former Armenian president Robert Kocharyan. Heritage Party leader Raffi Hovannissian would come in fourth with approximately 4 percent of the vote, whereas Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Armenia's first president and former foreign minister Vartan Oskanian would tie for fifth place with 3 percent each. ARF Member of Parliament, Vahan Hovhannisyan, came out with 1 percent of the vote.

Sixteen percent of respondents said they would not support anyone and another eleven percent responded that they do not know.

The survey was conducted between 9-20 October and included the surveying of 1,067 citizens across the country. ■

Kutaisi

Six MPs who were elected on the ticket of Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) on 1 October have since left the party and formed a separate faction in the Georgian Parliament. The faction called "non-partisan independent" becomes the seventh faction in the new parliament.

The formation of the faction became possible after majoritarian MP Giorgi Gozalishvili quit the parliamentary minority group. Gozalishvili was elected in Lagodekhi single-mandate constituency on behalf of the UNM

With Gozalishvili's withdrawal, UNM parliamentary minority group now has 59 MPs, although initially UNM endorsed in the Parliament total of 65 MPs. Five MPs, also majoritarian lawmakers elected as UNM members, refused to join the parliamentary minority group on the very first session of the newly elected legislative body on October 21. ■

Tbilisi

The Georgian Government has proposed to amend a legislation which, if approved by the Parliament, will grant PM Bidzina Ivanishvili power to appoint provincial governors in an agreement with the President. Currently governors are appointed by the President in consultation with Prime Minister. President Saakashvili appointed new governors in four provinces on October 16, nine days before the new government, led by PM Ivanishvili, took the office.

According to civil.ge a change in the rule of appointment of governors requires amendment to the law on government's authority and structure, which now says that a governor should be appointed by the President in consultations with PM.

The new government was initially considering proposing a draft giving the PM full authority over appointing and dismissing governors, excluding the role of the President. But such option could have been in conflict with the constitution, which says that governors carry out representation of both the President and the government in the regions.

In his address to an inaugural session of the new Parliament on October 21, President Saakashvili called to make post of governor directly elected. The Georgian Dream coalition's pre-election program, envisages making executive posts in local self-government bodies directly elected. ■

Yerevan

On October 30 the standing committees of the Armenian parliament began discussions on draft law "On 2013 State Budget of the Republic of Armenia". The Chairman of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Finance, Credit and Budgetary Affairs Gagik Minasyan, who was presiding over the sitting, also referred to an amendment to the budget law according to which future budgets will be presented according to a programme format.

Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan submitted to the legislators the thinking behind the 2013 budget and the main principles underpinning it.

Minister of Finance Vache Gabrielyan presented for the deputies' evaluation the macro-economic indices, and he parts of the income and expenditures of the budget draft law. ■

Commentary

No honeymoon period for Ivanishvili's government.

Most new governments enjoy a brief honeymoon period at the start of their administration: a time when they can bask in the glory of their victory and a period of grace that the public that elected them allows them before they start demanding that they deliver on their electoral promises. It has now become clear that the government of Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia, which was confirmed by parliament on 28 October, is not going to have such a luxury, as it starts to come to terms with a wide range of problems that they inherited from the previous government.

At the same time as it walks the delicate tightrope of political co-habitation, the new Georgian government is facing challenges in a number of fields, ranging from a tense situation in the prisons, to strike action in some key industries, to having to deal with a financial gap in the budget. The government had not even been properly approved by parliament when a number of problems started emerging, none so far resulting from anything of its own doing.

The victory of the Georgian Dream coalition in the 1 October elections raised expectations amongst vast sections of the Georgian population. But the problems of the last days are not a result of disappointment. It is far too early for that. Some observers have pointed a finger at renegade elements within the old regime, and others even went so far as to blame president Saakashvili himself of overtly working with the new government, whilst covertly trying to undermine it. If that is the case this is very short sighted because it is also far too early for that too. Voters tend to understand that a new government needs some time to settle in, and anything happening in the first few weeks is unlikely to have lasting impact.

But the challenges of the last few days are important because they test the resolve of the government: its ability to respond firmly but fairly in a timely fashion, to problems as they emerge; and the unity of the new government. So far there are no signs that the Coalition is failing on any of these accounts, but it is early days.



There is also in this however one other factor that needs to be taken into account. The man who led the Georgian Dream coalition to its electoral success a few weeks ago is no soft touch. Bidzina Ivanishvili is a self made man who achieved success in both business and politics, not thanks to luck or patronage but one suspects mainly on the basis of his shrewdness and on his ability to listen carefully before jumping to conclusions, an unusual virtue in many politicians, especially in Georgia.

Rocking the boat at this stage will not undermine Ivanishvili. But there are serious problems ahead, particular in the economic sphere. The honey moon period may have been over before it started, but the crucial point will be in a year or so time when Georgians start asking themselves if they are better off than before, Ivanishvili therefore is unlikely to be distracted. He needs to keep his eye on the ball and deliver to the Georgian people in those areas where it really matters. ■

This commentary was compiled by the editorial team of CEV

Presidential elections: political dynamism in A

With the democratic transition of power progressing in Georgia, the focus of the regional and international community is increasingly shifting to the upcoming elections in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Notably, Azerbaijan has scheduled presidential elections for October 2013, which are regarded by many observers as crucial for the democratic development of the country. Marion Kipiani was recently in Baku and she spoke with four experts about their perceptions of the political system, the upcoming elections, and the possible impacts of the change of government in Georgia on the electoral environment in Azerbaijan.

The political and electoral systems in Azerbaijan are still under development, this was one of the few statements that the four experts unanimously agreed on. **Razi Nurullayev**, Chairman of the Board of the "Region" International Analytical Centre (RIAC) and Deputy-chairman on International Affairs of the opposition Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, said the government and president are undertaking serious work to rebuild Azerbaijan into a modern country. However, Mr Nurullayev told us, the political system in the country is so bad that no single individual could possibly emerge as a "good" leader. Among the major obstacles to democratic development he identified the domination of the system of governance at all levels by the president's New Azerbaijan Party (NAP) as well as the government's attempts to deprive the opposition of resources. Nevertheless, Mr Nurullayev also noted that a major problem was the focus of all major political parties on personalities rather than ideologies and strategies. In this context, opposition political parties will need to shift their focus in order to convince the population of their policy positions and increase their public support. In Mr Nurullayev's view, the establishment of the "Public Chamber" opposition movement and its efforts toward fielding a single opposition candidate in the presidential elections permitted some reasonable hopes for competitive elections and a democratic transition of power.

Farhad Mammadov, Director of the Centre for Strategic Studies (SAM) under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, largely concurred with the analysis of the slow progress that political parties are undergoing in Azerbaijan to base themselves on ideologies rather than on charismatic leadership figures. But Mr Mammadov also stressed

that popular support to the governing NAP was to a considerable degree due to effectiveness of its policies as well as to the fact that the opposition spends much of its time fighting amongst each other. Since 1998, he pointed out, the political opposition has gathered in coalitions – and subsequently split again – twelve times, thus leaving the population confused as to political alignments and policy positions of the opposition. Mr Mammadov noted that opposition parties have access to "four to five opposition-leaning internet TV stations and several popular newspapers" and that Azerbaijan's legislation creates an environment conducive to democratic elections. Therefore, if opposition parties and candidates have so far failed to gather considerable popular support, in Mr Mammadov's view this is due to the fact that they do not present the population with a unified team and a credible vision for the future. NAP, on the contrary, despite being a political force with more than 500,000 members has always had a single candidate for presidential elections in its history and will in 2013 again be able to offer a coherent political platform addressing the major interests of the population: security, better living conditions, social security, education and economic growth outside the oil-and-gas sector.

The Director of the East-West Research Centre, **Arastun Orujlu**, discounted this analysis, saying Azerbaijan's political system is lacking even fundamental "rules of the game". He claimed that over the past decade, the government of Azerbaijan has been engaged in a systematic elimination of its political opponents both in practical and legal terms. With regard to the electoral environment, Mr Orujlu rhetorically asked how once could speak of democratic elections if the most basic preconditions of democracy, such as freedom of assembly and freedom of the media were absent. In particular, he singled out the stringent requirements for electoral contenders to collect signatures in support of their candidacy, which was prone to the disqualification of candidates due to supposedly invalid signatures and to the intimidation of supporters particularly in rural areas. Mr Orujlu questioned the unity of the NAP and said there was infighting within the government in the run-up to the 2013 presidential elections. However, he also reserved some criticism for the "Public Chamber" coalition of opposition forces. Mr Orujlu explained that the "Public Chamber" had been formed in November 2010 with an initial aim of having the results of the 2010 parliamentary elections cancelled. As such, it had been a movement

Farhad Mammadov is the Director of the Centre for Strategic Studies (SAM) under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan;

Razi Nurullayev is Chairman of the Board of the "Region" International Analytical Centre (RIAC) and Deputy-chairman on International Affairs of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party;

Anar Mammadli is the Chairman of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDSC) NGO;

Arastun Orujlu, Director of the East-West Research Centre

a chance for new Azerbaijan?

for democratic reform unifying many segments of Azerbaijani society. However, Mr Orujlu regretted, with a view to the presidential elections the focus of the “Public Chamber” has shifted almost exclusively to discussions over a single opposition candidate, to the detriment of questions of a possible coalition strategy and electoral platform. In the process, the movement has been transformed into a field of struggle between the two largest opposition parties, Musavat and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party. Mr Orujlu estimated real support of the government within Azerbaijani society as no more than 10-15 percent but said the opposition is currently unable to capitalize on this as it fails to express the hopes and ideas of a population largely disillusioned by the political class.

Anar Mammadli, chairman of the non-governmental organization Chairman of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDSC), agreed that the amendments to election legislation made in 2008 and 2010 were problematic. Notably, these amendments concern the signature collection requirements for electoral candidates mentioned by Mr Orujlu, together with the abolishment of an alternative form of registering candidates by way of a deposit, and the gradual shortening of the electoral period from 120 to 60 calendar days. The by far largest problem, Mr Mammadli said, for the development of the political system in general is an all-encompassing corruption that affects all political processes. Together with deficiencies in the electoral process and restrictions on the freedom of assembly, this leads to the atrophy of public governance, to the population’s lack of trust in political actors and the decrease of civic activity as people focus on trying to improve their socio-economic conditions. Despite the current stagnation, however, Mr Mammadli judged the upcoming presidential elections to be a chance for renewed political dynamism in the country. He said the democratic transition of power in Georgia will have positive effects as a reference point to be used by politicians, media representatives and civic activists in Azerbaijan. This influence could be further strengthened if the international community would more strictly align its support to countries in the region according to their democratic achievements. In general, Mr Mammadli noted, international attention should be raised about the electoral environment in Azerbaijan, and the country’s international partners should shift their approaches away from merely funding the work of civic organizations to increased political support of the democratization agenda. This is particularly necessary as the government has at its disposal instruments to lobby its interests on the international level. As a result, Mr Mammadli told us, not only civil society organizations within the country but also international bodies such as OSCE/ODIHR and the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission face difficulties accessing parliamentarians and the government of Azerbaijan for recommendations on electoral legislation. ■

Report prepared for CEW by Marion Kipiani

Azerbaijan increases penalties against those who violate restrictions on freedom of assembly ahead of Presidential poll.

Amendments to Azerbaijan’s Law on Freedom of Assembly were passed this week almost unanimously in the Azerbaijani Parliament with 105 votes in favour and only five votes against.

Only two MPs, Fazil Mustafa of the Great Establishment Party and Igbal Aghazadeh from the Umid Party, spoke out against the amendments.

“This (change) will put even greater obstacles in the way of citizens achieving the right to freedom of assembly,” Isa Gambar, leader of the opposition Musavat party, told the AFP.

As reported in CEW last week, the amendments were drafted by Rafail Jabrayilov of the governing New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), and intended to curb “unauthorised actions” and to “protect human rights violations” as a result of these activities. In other words, the new legislation is designed to restrict anti-government protests.

YAP Deputy Executive Secretary, MP Mubariz Gurbanli, described the changes as “absolutely right” and “logical.” He called the statements made by the opposition movement in Azerbaijan “unreasonable.” The opposition has asserted that these amendments will curb freedom of expression and freedom of assembly even further in Azerbaijan.

“If the opposition wants to hold mass actions, they must act within law. Otherwise they will face the law. From this point of view, I believe that the changes providing for higher fines for illegal actions, are right and logical,” explained Gurbanli.

The changes to the legislation witness a massive increase on the penalties that may be imposed upon demonstration organisers, participants and associates. The fine for “organising, holding or participating” in “unauthorised meetings” that violate citizen’s rights has increased from 300 manat to a minimum of 5000 and maximum of 8000 manat. Should the actions result in a “violation of the public order or resistance to the legal demands of [a] government representative,” the disruption of traffic, or the regular activities of businesses and other organisations the fine will also increase to between five and eight thousand manat. The fine for this crime was previously 500 manat. No changes were made with regard to the section concerning the imprisonment of organisers and participants.

On Friday, protesters associated with the pro-democracy coalition, the Public Chamber, attempted to stage a protest against these amendments and in solidarity with the youth activists who tried to hold an anti-corruption rally the previous Saturday. Baku City Council rejected their request to hold the demonstration outside of the Parliament buildings, but the protesters went ahead with their actions anyway.

Reports from the Public Chamber’s facebook page noted that demonstrators were immediately detained by police who for several hours ahead of time blocked off roads around the parliament and who inspected bus routes and removed suspicious individuals. So far over 20 individuals are known to have been detained for their participation in Friday’s protest activities. According to a facebook post by Razi Naruyallev with the Public Chamber, protesters were arrested in groups of 6-7, forced onto waiting buses and taken to unknown locations. ■

Report prepared for CEW by Karina Gould

Transparency International Georgia - Statement on Illegal Phone Tapping.

Everybody knew that it was going on, including those international organisations that for the last nine years hailed Georgia as a beacon of democracy. Phone tapping of private citizens on an industrial scale had become a feature of the way the Saakashvili government maintained control over society. Finally the cat is out of the bag, and Georgian civil society is now demanding explanations and punishment. A few days ago Transparency International Georgia issued a statement summing up the situation.

Transparency International Georgia is responding to information spread in society regarding the illegal 'tapping' of the telecommunications of citizens by the law enforcement authorities. According to Mamia Sanadiradze, owner of a company which operates electronic communications, he was compelled to sell his controlling stake in the company as a result of pressure exerted on him after his rejection of government demands to carry out phone tapping.

Periodically over the last few years, a series of wiretaps have been released on social networks and through the media. It is unknown who made and distributed many of these audio recordings. Notably, the recordings have been disseminated during politically tense periods, and in particular on the eve of elections. In the majority of cases, the recordings prominently featured opposition politicians and opponents of the government. In some instances, the recordings were conducted by the government. It is still unknown to the public under what conditions and on what grounds such recordings were carried out.

This year, Transparency International Georgia sent Georgian mobile, internet and telephone service operators a questionnaire as part of its research into online media. The questionnaire, among other issues, dealt with the unauthorized practice of phone tapping.



Contrary to the information provided during face to face meetings, operators did not confirm in writing that any illegal surveillance of their customers had taken place, or that they had been pressurized into committing the illegal act of phone tapping.

We welcome the recent decision of the Constitutional Court. According to this decision, a controversial article of the law on Operative Investigative Activity - which in the view of the Georgian Young Lawyers Association's allowed the law enforcement authorities to conduct surveillance on confidential internet correspondence without a court decision - was deemed unconstitutional.

Transparency International Georgia calls on the new government to fully investigate these cases of illegal tapping of Georgian citizens. We also believe it is important that all operators in Georgia make the information regarding the above violations public available to this investigation. Transparency International Georgia will continue to survey the media and communications sector, and will inform society of any further problems identified. ■

Amnesty International says that holding an internet governance forum in Baku is “deeply ironic”.

Amnesty International (AI) described as “deeply ironic” the fact that an international dialogue on internet governance is being held this week in Baku, 5-9 November. The discussion, which will include such topics as human rights, freedom of expression and access to the internet, seems out of place, notes the report in a country where “people who exercise this fundamental right to criticise President Ilham Aliyev, his family or government, risk being threatened, attacked or imprisoned – whether they do so on-or off-line.”

The scathing expose on the state of freedom of expression in the resource rich country on the Caspian Sea resulted in a call from the global human rights organisation “for the Azerbaijani authorities to end the crackdown on dissent and to ensure that all citizens are able to enjoy their fundamental rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.”

An independent and free media environment is extremely important for a democratic society. The AI document highlights that while prosperity and stability have been achieved in the past twenty years in Azerbaijan, the human rights and freedom of expression situation has deteriorated. Pointing to the banning of peaceful anti-government protests, imprisonment of participants, legislative and administrative intimidation used to shut down human rights or democracy-based NGOs, the ill-treatment and detention of journalists, and the mounting siege against new forms of media, the Amnesty piece highlights the incongruence of holding a multi-stakeholder forum on internet governance in a country which actively monitors its internet users.

“The government,” asserts the AI report, “is already able to monitor and intercept all internet communication carried through Azerbaijani [internet] providers without acquiring a warrant or notifying the individual or

provider.” According to an investigation by the Free Expression Online initiative, an NGO coalition monitoring internet restriction in Azerbaijan, all internet providers must install “information extraction programmes provided by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technologies, which are then operated directly by the Ministry of National Security to monitor any or all customers’ internet use and intercept their communications.”

Moreover, the report notes that independent broadcasting over the internet is under threat as the authorities in Azerbaijan are seeking to expand their control of material broadcast over the internet.

Currently, all TV and radio stations must obtain a broadcasting license. This in and of itself, notes AI, would be unproblematic if the authorities in Azerbaijan authorised licenses to all broadcasters, not just those who are either pro-government or non-critical. To extend the licensing requirement to online TV and radio broadcasters would have “a chilling effect” according to AI for independent media in Azerbaijan.

The state of human rights in Azerbaijan is very much on the agenda of international participants in the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), several of whom have noted that they will use the opportunity to meet with local human rights activists and on-line journalists.

The European Commission for example has announced that its delegation, led by Vice President Neelie Kroes will “stress the importance of using the Internet as a means to contribute to innovation and economic growth but without compromising transparency, democracy and protection of human rights.”

The European Commission delegation will be promoting its Open Internet and “No Disconnect Strategy” while in Baku, particularly in a meeting they will hold with President Ilham Aliyev. The “No Disconnect Strategy”, was adopted last year by the European Commission “to provide ongoing support to Internet users, bloggers and cyber-activists living under authoritarian regimes [...] to uphold the EU’s commitment to ensure human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected both online and off-line, and that internet and other information and communication technology (ICT) can remain a driver of political freedom, democratic development and economic growth.”

According to a report from Transitions Online, the IGF has remained under the radar in Azerbaijani society, perhaps after the attention drawn towards the country’s human rights records during the Eurovision Song Contest held in May on this year. Regarding internet freedom, the Transitions Online piece noted Azerbaijan does not have much to boast about: Freedom House highlighted Azerbaijan as a region likely to regress in the near future.

The 7th Annual Internet Governance Forum (IGF) will be held in Baku from 5-9 November. The IGF is organised by the United Nations Secretary General as a result of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Tunis, Tunisia in 2005. The idea is to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders, government, NGO, and private, to discuss and share best practices, issues, increasing accessibility and innovations in public policies on internet governance. ■

Report prepared for CEW by Karina Gould

Adjara gets a new government.

The Autonomous Republic of Adjara in Georgia confirmed its new government with 13 votes in favour and none against in a vote held on 1 November in the Supreme Council of Adjara, the regional legislative body.

The representatives to the Adjarian Supreme Council were elected on 1 October alongside Georgia's national parliamentary elections. As in the national elections, the Georgian Dream candidates won a majority of seats, winning 13 out of the 21 seats in the Supreme Council, the remaining 8 going to the newly minted opposition, the United National Movement. In the majoritarian single-mandate constituencies, both parties won 3 seats each. Proportionally, the Georgian Dream won 57.55% and the UNM won 36.94% of the vote.

The Adjarian Government is made up of the Head of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara and four Ministerial positions. Archil Khabadze, a Georgian Dream candidate, was confirmed as the Head of the Adjarian Government on 30 of October. Khabadze was selected by newly elected Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili and nominated formally by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

The President upon his nomination of Khabadze expressed his appreciation for outgoing Adjarian leader, and UNM supporter, Levan Varshalomidze.

Saakashvili commented that under Varshalomidze's leadership Adjara transformed itself from an autocratic region to one of Europe's "fastest developing" areas. He commended the former Adjarian head for the "unimaginable progress" that took place under his watch. Thanking Varshalomidze and his team for "the miracle" in Adjara, he announced that the UNM has moved into opposition in Adjara and that Varshalomidze will continue to lead the UNM in the region as an opposition leader.

Khabadze, a 32-year old banker, was formerly the head of the Batumi branch of Ivanishvili's Cartu Bank. As he announced his support for Khabadze, Ivanishvili described the young leader as "a very good manager." His only reservation about Khabadze? His youth – though the Georgian Prime Minister also noted this quality as a potential asset, as the new head of the Supreme Council of Adjara "will have more energy" to deal with the challenges of his office.

The Government building in the Adjaran Capital Batumi.



Khabadze announced on 1 November his cabinet, which includes Giorgi Tavartkiladze as the new Minister of Finance and Economy, Zaur Putkaradze as the Minister of Agriculture, Gia Tavamaishvili as Minister of Education, Culture and Sport and Nugzar Sumanidze as the Minister of Healthcare and Social Protection.

According to Khabadze, the Ministers were selected based on their professional experience "through consensus" in a decision-making process involving Georgian Dream leaders and Adjarian lawmakers.

The eight UNM candidates abstained from participating in the vote to confirm the new cabinet.

According to one UNM lawmaker, the opposition refused to participate as they felt they "cannot share responsibility with the new government" for unrealistic promises made to the electorate by the Georgian Dream.

"Our main goal is to establish real local and regional governments," said Davit Usupashvili, the Chairman of the Georgian Parliament, who attended the 1 November session as a special guest.

The Parliamentary Chairman stressed he hoped that his government would be able not only to solve problems facing Adjara but to create a "model of governance for other regions," stressing a regional model that would give greater strength and responsibility to government at the regional level. A very different approach, emphasised Usupashvili, from that of the previous government which favoured a strong central government. ■

Article prepared for CEW by Karina Gould with additional reporting from Georgian media sources.