

Caucasus ELECTIONSWATCH

A weekly review of elections related processes in the Caucasus Region

20 November 2012

Baku demonstrators demand dissolution of Parliament.

Dozens of demonstrators were arrested in Baku over the weekend after participating in an unsanctioned demonstration calling for the dissolution of Parliament.

As was the case with previous protests organised by youth movements and opposition groups in Azerbaijan, the Baku City Council did not issue a permit for the demonstration which took place on Saturday 17, November in Fountain Square, citing potential disruptions to traffic in the city centre. According to the Facebook event set-up to organise the protest, over 1,700 people confirmed their attendance. In the end only around a hundred turned up.

The rally began at 3:00pm in Fountain Square. Dozens of activists, including political leaders from the Popular Front, Musavat, Open Society and Democratic Parties of Azerbaijan have been arrested. Several protesters claim to have been injured as the police broke up the demonstration. Deputy Chairperson of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan, Gozel Bayramli, claims that the police broke her arm in the clash.

Most of the detained have been sentenced to either minor fines or 5-7 days administrative detention, terms that reflect the legislation on unsanctioned demonstrations prior to the increase in penalties passed by the Azerbaijani parliament just two weeks ago. The new legislation is not set to take effect for another three months.

Under pressure from young activists who find the style of the opposition leadership inadequate, Azerbaijan's embattled opposition parties now feel obliged to change tactics. The use of facebook to advertise and promote the event – although used before by youth groups, is a fairly recent phenomena for the main opposition parties. The demands of the demonstrators for the dissolution of parliament is also seen as an upping of the political stakes ahead of Presidential elections next October.

Political observers do not think that either the government or opposition at this stage want to escalate tensions unnecessarily. Both however are testing each other's resolve, as well as international reaction.

Source: CEW editorial team

A protestor being restrained by police in Baku on 17 November 2012
(picture by Mehman Huseynov).



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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Baku

Azerbaijan's ruling party, The New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), has celebrated the 20th anniversary since its establishment. For the last two decades the party has been on the vanguard of Azerbaijani politics. It provided the political base for President Heidar Aliev and oversaw the transition of power to his son Ilham.

At a ceremony held at Buta Palace in Baku, attended by leading government and party officials, President Aliev spoke about the circumstances that led to the establishment of the party.

"The founding conference of the Yeni Azerbaijan party was held under the leadership and chairmanship of great leader Heydar Aliyev in Nakhchivan. It was a really historical event. I can say that this became a turning point for our young state, since we all remember the first months, the first years of our independence. These were very hard and tragic years. The power at that time was not strong enough to preserve independence. At that time we lived in conditions of war and military failures on the front certainly strong shook our society.

President Aliev said that the first steps of the party were aimed at restoration of political stability in Azerbaijan." It is no accident, in summer of 1993, in period when the civil war started in Azerbaijan, all hopes of our society were again connected with the genius of Heydar Aliyev. The great leader who came to power at the people's request could stabilize the situation in a short period of time, which allowed our country to step to the way of development. Since that year and up to date Azerbaijan follows only the development way.

It is no accident that today Azerbaijan is famous as the fastest economy in the world. In terms of political stability, Azerbaijan is an example for many countries." ■

Source: commonsense.eu

Tbilisi

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Philip H. Gordon visited Tbilisi last week to meet President Saakashvili, Prime Minister Ivanishvili and other officials.

Speaking to journalists Gordon said that the U.S. was "impressed" with Georgia's democratic development involving "free and fair" elections and "democratic and peaceful transfer of power." He said it was "in some ways a model for the region and beyond."



"I also stressed how important it is and will continue to be for the two sides [the government and the presidency] to work together," Gordon said. "We know it's not easy after bitter election campaign. It's not always easy to work with your political opponents, but it's essential for a democracy to thrive."

He said that in that context he discussed with the PM recent arrests of officials from the previous government.

"I stressed how critically important it is for the process to be absolutely transparent," Gordon said. "Everybody wants to see rule of law implemented and anybody who has committed a crime to be held accountable. But at the same time it is essential to avoid any perception or reality of selective prosecutions and that was the point that I stressed, because I think that it's important for Georgia's reputation in the world and its path towards the Euro-Atlantic institutions."

He said that tensions between the two sides after the hard-fought election campaign were inevitable, but it's important "not to let those tensions stand in a way of rule of law."

Gordon said that it was not in Georgia's interest to turn these tensions "into a real fight and acts of political retributions and accusations."

"I was pretty clear with the Prime Minister that nobody wants to see an absence of rule of law and if people are guilty of crimes those crimes should be investigated and people should be held accountable," he said. "But I was equally clear that in that context it is absolutely critical to be scrupulous in both the reality and perception of how this process is working. If it looks like or it is designed solely to go after political adversaries or it's not done in a transparent way, then the whole country will pay the price. That was my message to the Prime Minister. Everybody wants to see criminals to be prosecuted, but it needs to be done in a way that fully acknowledges the needs of due process and transparency and that's we hope to see from Georgia moving forward." ■

Source: civil.ge

Possible cooperation between opposition parties in Armenia ahead of 2013 Presidential elections?

Opposition legislators in Armenia have called for a special session of parliament to discuss possible amendments to the Electoral Code, the Criminal Code and the Law on the State Registration of the Population.

The amendments, hopes the opposition, will be "instrumental in preventing fraud" in the upcoming Presidential election in February 2013. Of particular salience is the proposed amendment to exclude Armenian citizens who have lived outside of Armenia for more than six months from the electoral lists.

"We suggest that from now on only citizens who are in the territory of Armenia should be included in the electoral roll. All those who are absent from Armenia for more than six months must be excluded from this roll," said Levon Zurabian, the leader of the Armenian National Congress (ANC) representatives in the National Assembly.

The ANC says it has secured the necessary 44 out of 131 signatures from minority lawmakers from the Prosperous Armenia Party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), the Free Democrats and the Heritage party.

According to the opposition, "the presence of up to 700,000 such citizens helped the government commit electoral fraud and secure a landslide victory" in the parliamentary elections of May 2012.

The ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), however, has denied these allegations and called the actions of the minority parties "political show."

Galust Sahakian, RPA parliamentary leader, told journalists on Friday that neither his party nor its coalition partner, Orinats Yerkir, which together hold over half of the seats in parliament, would participate in what he described as the "senseless activities" of the opposition parties. If neither of the coalition parties participate in the 21 November special session, then quorum will not be reached and the meeting will not be able to proceed.

Sahakian said the ANC action supported by the other three parties in parliament was "an attempt to boost their political activity in the run-up to next year's presidential election."

These feelings were echoed by RPA parliamentarian Eduard Sharmanazov, who stated, "I don't think that the opposition's agenda will be backed by 66 deputies, which is the requirement of the law."

Moreover, both the ruling coalition and electoral officials argue that these amendments would be a violation of the constitutional rights of citizens in Armenia. In current legislation, voting may only take place in Armenia which requires those Armenians living abroad to return to the country to cast their ballot. If this right were to be repealed these citizens would be left without the ability to exercise their franchise.

Regardless the opposition feels that the governing parties should at least show up to the debate. As Hrant Bagratian, a representative with

the ANC, put it, it would be a "disgrace" for the governing parties to fail to attend next Wednesday's session.

"I don't think it is right and becoming of the Republican Party," he said.

Naira Zohrabian of the Prosperous Armenia Party also expressed her dismay at the government's reaction stating that, "If they find that even discussing this draft legislation is so terrifying, then I have no words."

According to the OSCE/ODIHR Final Report on the May 2012 parliamentary elections in Armenia, for the first time in the last elections Armenian citizens residing abroad who were in Armenia on election day were allowed to participate in the proportional part of the elections. These voters had to register at least seven days in advance of the election with a local electoral precinct. OSCE/ODIHR lists 1,256 voters being added to the list through this mechanism.

Of greater concern, however, as noted in the OSCE/ODIHR report was the fact that Armenians residing abroad who do not register with the Armenian consular service abroad remain on the voters' list registered in their last known address in Armenia. Add to this the fact that the Armenian voters' list increased by 170,000 since 2008, which, according to elections authorities, is a result of citizens turning 18 since 2008 and the granting of citizenship to persons in the Armenian diaspora.

All of the minority parties have begun to conduct both private and public party consultations across the country concerning the above amendments, the possibilities of moving from the current system to a much stronger parliamentary model of governance as well as the opportunity to field a single candidate to challenge incumbent president and RPA candidate Serzh Sargsyan next February.

After private meetings held between the PAP and the ANC, rumours are gaining momentum that the opposition will align their support behind a single candidate. Without giving anything away, Levon Zurabian, leader of the ANC, said upon leaving the meeting, "I think that this possibility cannot be ruled out."

Vartan Oskanian, a senior politician and former Foreign Minister with the PAP also alluded to a potential collaboration between the two parties. "I can say that there are at least similarities. For now we will not speak about details, there are no agreements yet... This is only a beginning," said Oskanian.

Though nothing has been confirmed, there are clear signals that the opposition parties in the National Assembly are finding common ground upon which to unite. Perhaps a single candidate is still just a far off idea, but cooperation on electoral and political reform might be the engines that drive these parties to the next stage. ■

Report prepared for CEW by Karina Gould.

No Georgian please, w

The Secretary General of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, last week nearly became the first victim of Georgia's new system of political cohabitation when he got caught into the controversy surrounding the arrest and charging of senior military and security officials from the previous government on accusations of abuse of power.

Rasmussen's facebook page was bombarded with Georgians commenting on various statements that the Secretary General made throughout the week, as he met with President Mikheil Saakashvili in Prague and later in Brussels with the new Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. The problem was that many of the comments were in Georgian.

At a press conference with Ivanishvili, Rasmussen reminded all Georgians that the official NATO languages of the alliance were English and French and asked them not to post in Georgian. It was a light moment at the end of a tense four day period.

Speaking at a meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Prague on Monday, November 12, NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, said, after he was asked about Georgia, that he appreciated the way October 1 parliamentary elections were conducted and added that Georgia passed "a litmus test when it comes to democratic development."

He said that he also appreciated the way how transfer of power took place following the elections. "So far so good," he said.

But Rasmussen also added: "No reason to hide that I'm extremely concerned about the development we have seen since then not least related to recent arrests of political opponents in Georgia."

"Well, I am not going to interfere with judicial system in Georgia. It's for the legal system, the judicial system in Georgia to sort out these cases. But of course it's important that such trials are not undermined by political interference," he said and added that NATO would follow developments "very closely."

The comments were picked up by pro Saakashvili media outlets and commentators which claimed that the arrests had prejudiced Georgia's NATO membership bid, something that both the previous and the current governments declare as a priority.

President Saakashvili himself addressed the issue in the tone of his recently adopted posture as Georgia's elder statesman.

"It is of course very unfortunate that the Secretary General was very critical. I actually do not remember NATO having a critical tone about Georgia in recent years and I can barely recall NATO having such a critical tone towards any country," Saakashvili said in televised remarks.

He said that he did not think the new government carried out these arrests "intentionally" to harm Georgia's NATO integration, but was rather a result of the new authorities' "inexperience".

"If only they had waited for at least few weeks... I really can't understand why these hasty decisions were needed," Saakashvili said.

To add pressure, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly also adopted a resolution which was critical of the arrests.

All this hapened as Bidzina Ivanishvili arrived in Brussels to meet senior NATO and EU officials on his first foreign trip after becoming Prime Minister.



In a joint statement three senior Georgian Dream Parliamentarians: Tedo Japaridze, chairman of parliamentary committee for foreign affairs; MP Irakli Sesiasvili, chairman of parliamentary committee for defense and security and MP Victor Dolidze, chairman of parliamentary committee for European integration reacted sharply to the criticism. "It is regrettable that this statement [by the NATO Secretary General] and resolution were based not on information provided by NATO liaison office in Georgia, diplomatic missions of NATO-member states or authoritative international organizations, but, based on distorted and one-side assessments presumably provided by representatives of the United National Movement," they stated.

Ivanishvili met Rasmussen on Wednesday by which time what had looked like a NATO rebuke had softened to become a matter of benign concern.

The issue dominated a joint press conference of PM Ivanishvili and Secretary General Rasmussen after their meeting.

"Indeed I raised this issue with the Prime Minister and I made my position clear," Rasmussen said. "I am concerned if these trials are perceived to be politically motivated; that would be damaging for the image of the country and the government even if it's not true – that's my concern."

"This is the reason why it is of utmost importance to stress that such trials must take place in accordance with basic principles of rule of law, ensure full transparency, ensure due process; that's what I have made clear. The Prime Minister has ensured me that will be the case," Rasmussen said. "Based on that I have to say and really stress that we are not going to interfere with ongoing trials. We have confidence that they will be conducted without political interference and live up to fundamental principles of rule of law."

The NATO Secretary General said that his remarks on November 12 were made "out of positive interest in seeing progress in Georgia's relationship with NATO."

e're NATO!



"My concern is that it may be damaging if prosecutions, if trials are perceived to be politically motivated and I think the Prime Minister shares my concern. That's why we have mutual interest in stressing the need for full compliance with the fundamental principles of rule of law to ensure that possible trials are conducted in transparent manner without political interference," Rasmussen said.

PM Ivanishvili told journalists: "Don't try to find differences in our views" about this issue. He said that his and the NATO Secretary General's views that ongoing criminal proceedings against several former officials should not be politically motivated "are fully in concurrence".

Ivanishvili said that for the purpose of securing more transparency he had offered the Secretary General NATO's monitoring "in any form" over ongoing criminal proceedings against several former officials.

"To our pleasure, Mr. Rasmussen expressed clear confidence towards us and he did not deem it necessary," PM Ivanishvili said.

Rasmussen said that the Georgian PM had offered him to establish "a certain specific mechanism to actually follow these processes."

"I think the Prime Minister wanted to assure me of his clear commitment to principles of rule of law," Rasmussen said. "Prime Minister I really appreciate your commitment to these fundamental principles, but let me ensure you that we don't need new mechanism, new institutions; we have NATO-Georgia Commission, I have a special representative, who is in a constant dialogue with the Georgian authorities."

"Based on the Prime Minister's clear assurances, I do not see a need for new institutions to follow the development. I have confidence that the government will live up to these high principles," the NATO Secretary General said.

And that was it. It was only left for Rasmussen to remind his facebook fans not to write to him in Georgian. ■

European Vice-President describes Azerbaijani government as having a "very troubling attitude to freedom and democracy"

Neelie Kroes, Vice-President of the European Commission, expressed her concern about the "very troubling attitude to freedom and democracy" of the government of Azerbaijan following her attendance at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) from 5-7 of November in Baku.

Describing Baku as a "fascinating city" and the South Caucasus resource rich nation as having an "extraordinary past and present," Kroes intimated in a 10 November blogpost on the European Commission website her original apprehensions about attending the forum in a country with so little regard for human rights. While she said that her decision to attend was vindicated by the fact that Azerbaijani journalists, bloggers and activists felt her attendance was helpful, she nevertheless revealed that her initial concerns were proven to be true.

Not least of all was the fact that the computers of two of the Vice-President's staff members were hacked while in a Baku hotel, reports the BBC. According to the report, security messages from Apple advised the laptop owners that a third party had accessed the machines. While refusing to speculate on who might have been behind this so-called "hack-attack," European Commission spokesperson Ryan Heath confirmed the laptops will be sent for forensic analysis.

"I'm presuming it was some kind of surveillance," Mr Heath told the Associated Press. "What we're going to do is to get the computers forensically analysed to see what if anything was taken out of them."

The authorities in Azerbaijan deny the allegations.

"This statement has no basis," said Ali Hasanov, head of the Department of Social and Political Affairs at the Azerbaijani Presidential Administration, in an interview with Trend.az on 12 November.

"Following the statement, we have given instructions to the relevant agencies," explained Hasanov, "including the hotel administration, where they were staying, to address the issue. Any interference into their computers is out of the question, no evidence and facts confirming these statements have been revealed."

Hasanov continued that such a statement was made with the explicit intention to "harm the image of Azerbaijan, the organisers of the event, or to diminish their authority and blacken their image." Hasanov urged Ms. Kroes to turn the matter over to the Prosecutor General's Office of Azerbaijan if she believes the computer attack to be true.

Furthermore, the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Azerbaijan, Mahmud Mammadgulyev, rejected Kroes comments on the lack of freedom of expression and state of human rights in the country, simply stating they are "wrong."

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EurasiaNet.org commentary: Georgia: Four Observations Questions from the Georgian

By Lincoln Mitchell

The recent parliamentary election in Georgia saw the ruling United National Movement (UNM) party defeated by the opposition Georgian Dream (GD) coalition led by new Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. This election has been variously described as evidence of the strength of Georgian democracy, a turn toward Russia by Georgia, a victory which Ivanishvili bought by spending lavishly in the United States, Europe and Georgia, the end of UNM domination, and more or less everything in between. It is still too early to know the real meaning of this election, but it is possible to make some observations, and raise some questions.

Four Observations

This election does not make Georgia a democracy: Supporters of President Saakashvili, both inside and outside of Georgia, have argued that because there was a smooth transition of power, orchestrated by Saakashvili, Georgia is now a real democracy. Opponents of Saakashvili have come to a similar conclusion, arguing that the defeat of Saakashvili government now makes Georgia a democracy. There is some accuracy in both these views. By turning over control of the government, Saakashvili helped his country become more democratic; and by defeating one-party UNM dominance, the GD made Georgia more democratic. Nonetheless, Georgia today is still quite a distance from being a democratic country in a truly meaningful sense.

The UNM did not give up easily: It is significant that Saakashvili's decision to concede defeat occurred after an almost year-long campaign of harassing the opposition, arresting opposition activists, limiting access to media and even going so far as to strip his primary opponent of his Georgian citizenship. While it is not possible to determine why Saakashvili didn't simply steal the election, the explanation that it was the huge international election observer presence, as well as significant outside pressure at the key moment, was a decisive factor. It should not be assumed that a basic democratic impulse in Saakashvili prompted him to admit defeat.

Politics is still a zero sum game in Georgia: After being soundly defeated in the election, Saakashvili didn't seek to assert his full constitutional and legal authority. Instead, he uncharacteristically turned over all the ministries and essentially the entire government to the GD. This can be interpreted in part to the UNM's desire to accelerate the transition and respect the will of the people: but it also indicates that Georgian political

institutions are not at the point where power and decision making can be shared by more than one party.

Money played a critical, but complex, role: Ivanishvili's money did not make it possible for him to buy the election, rather it made it possible for him to compete with the UNM, which was able to use governmental assets for partisan political purposes. For example, while Ivanishvili spent millions of dollars of his personal fortune on lobbying efforts in the United States and Europe, the Georgian government had established similar relationships with foreign lobbyists for years to advance causes beneficial both to the country as a whole and to the incumbent political party. By 2011, the government also had turned many embassies, at least partially, into partisan political operations. Only an opposition party which, like the Georgian Dream, had substantial resources of its own could compete with that. Similarly, the UNM relied on government resources to provide staff, travel and space for campaign operations. This would have given UNM candidates an overwhelming advantage against an opposition force that did not have deep pockets.

Four Questions

What does the UNM do now? The UNM has now become the opposition in Georgia, but it is not clear what that means. It is possible that UNM leaders will build support based around a neo-liberal ideology. This could contribute to a multi-party political system in Georgia. The UNM could also become a catch-all party for groups and individuals who become dissatisfied with the GD. Lastly, there is a distinct possibility that the UNM, now that it is out of power, starts to fade away. Toward the end of its tenure, the UNM was, in some respects, simply a governing party whose major allure was its proximity to power and the resources that go with power.

What is needed to create multi-party democracy in Georgia? The central political challenge facing the GD and Georgia is to break the pattern of the post-independence era, in which Georgian politics revolves around a single party. Georgia's political culture still needs to change dramatically, so that there is room for substantive debate within an agreed upon structure. In other words there needs to be a legal and accepted role for the disagreement and conflict that is central to real democracy. Much of the responsibility for establishing a multi-party system will fall to the GD. The default setting in Georgia is for a one-party system; and the GD is poised to benefit from that setting. It is up

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European Vice-President describes Azerbaijani government as having a “very troubling attitude to freedom and democracy”

Kroes wrote in her blog that she was denied access to meet with political prisoners despite the personal promise from the President. She described the harassment of activists at the conference as well as the harsh reality of the media environment in Azerbaijan, noting that in contradiction to Azerbaijan's promises to ensure press freedom during the Eurovision song contest, conditions on freedom of expression have actually worsened in the country.

Acknowledging that unlike in many countries, everyone in Azerbaijan has access to the internet, Kroes describes the internet in Azerbaijan as a “double-edged sword.” Expanding that if Azerbaijanis decide to use the internet in a way the government disapproves, “they face consequences.”

“So much,” she says, “for openness.”

Mammadgulyev commented that “such unfounded statements do not correspond to the spirit of cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU and can harm relations.”

The Foreign Minister, in a meeting with EU Chargé d'Affaires, Toralf Pils, last Tuesday in Baku, informed the EU representative that over 60% of Azerbaijani citizens actively use the internet and this demonstrated one of the ways in which the authorities in Baku are pursuing democratic reforms and supporting human rights.

He also alluded to Kroes not having properly organised the visit with prisoners, stating that legally, representatives of international organisations and foreign countries may only visit prisoners once they have obtained the consent of the relevant bodies in Azerbaijan, noting that both Nils Muiznieks, Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe, and Dunja Mijatović, the Representative on Media Freedom of the OSCE, met with prisoners during the conference at the beginning of November in Baku.

All three international officials expressed their hope in a joint statement following the IGF that Azerbaijan would remain open to a dialogue on the pursuit of expanding freedom of expression in the country. Kroes, Muiznieks and Mijatović provided four concrete steps the Azerbaijani government could take to signal their commitment to both media freedom and freedom of expression. These include transparent investigations into crimes against journalists, the release of citizen activists, bloggers and journalists from detention, the decriminalisation of defamation in line with the European Court of Human Rights and steps to strengthen the independent and impartial review of cases of freedom of expression by the judiciary. ■

Report prepared for CEW by Karina Gould

to GD leaders, then, to establish a new political tone in Georgia and, perhaps even to recognize that an omnibus ruling coalition, such as the GD is currently constructed, may not be best for Georgian democracy. The GD is now a broad coalition: such a structure may have been needed to defeat the UNM, but Georgian democracy might be better served by seeing the coalition, over the next months or years, break down into its constituent parts.

Did the election result occur because of or in spite of western democratization assistance? The answer is not clear. Western funding certainly played a role in helping civil society groups, including Transparency International and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, raise awareness about corruption, potential election fraud and overreaching by the Saakashvili administration. At the same time, many Western governments seemed to expect the UNM to retain power. Accordingly, Western criticism of the UNM government, on election related issues, seemed restrained. Meanwhile, the GD worked a lot less closely with western democracy assistance organizations than the Rose revolutionaries had in 2003.

What is the real legacy of the Rose Revolution? Some, in the West, see the Rose Revolution as having been led by Western-oriented reformers who attempted to turn Georgia a modern, democratic state. Others believe the revolution ultimately fell short, leaving Georgia once again with a closed government, in which a small group of people controlled most of the power, and who were willing to trample human rights and democratic norms as they wielded authority. There are elements of truth in both these visions, but, the real and complex legacy of the Rose Revolution will become more apparent over time.

Conclusion

The outcome of the Georgian parliamentary elections may, if things go right, move the country further down the path toward Western-style democracy, featuring official accountability and a competitive party system. But the elections may also lead to the collapse of the opposition and the consolidation of a new one-party system. It is obviously too early to know what will happen, but it is not too early to begin to move past the fear and heated rhetoric which dominated the campaign and its immediate aftermath, and at least begin to ask the right questions. ■

Lincoln Mitchell is an Associate Research Scholar at Columbia University's Harriman Institute. He is a frequent commenter on political development in the former Soviet Union and is currently writing a book on the Color Revolutions. During the parliamentary election campaign, he served as an informal advisor to the Georgian Dream coalition.

He contributed this commentary to EurasiaNet.org

Women determined to make their mark in the new Georgian Parliament.

On 15 November, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) organised the “Win with Women: Strengthen Political Parties” conference at the Tbilisi Marriott Hotel. Participants included female politicians and activists as well as U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Richard Norland and Swedish Ambassador Diana Janse.

The conference focused on the role of women in Georgian politics and the challenges they face once elected. The most serious challenges brought up by participants included inadequate access to resources, primarily with regard to campaign financing, and media bias against female candidates.

Ambassador Norland opened the conference reiterating the support of the United States for increasing female participation in Georgian politics.

“More women in the Georgian Parliament will encourage protection of the interests and concerns of all Georgians,” stated Ambassador Norland before adding that Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili has confirmed his commitment to increasing the role of women in Georgian politics.

Swedish Ambassador Diana Janse emphasised the correlation between gender equality and economic welfare and advancement. “These statistics,” she said, “should be taken into consideration if a country wishes to achieve economic improvements.”

According to Manana Kobakhidze, recently elected on behalf of the Georgian Dream, “the situation concerning women in Georgian politics has improved recently.” She added, “The new parliament has more female MPs than the previous one. Women can play a serious role in politics as they are more diplomatic and can handle some situations better than men. The parliamentary elections showed this.”

The 1 October parliamentary elections indeed demonstrated a significant increase of female representatives in the Georgian legislature. Out of 150 parliamentarians there are 16 female members of parliament, up from 9 in the previous parliament. Female parliamentarians make-up 10.6% of the Georgian legislature, which would theoretically bump Georgia up to 111th from 129th worldwide in terms of the share of women in national parliaments according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. A far cry, however, from the 30% threshold most groups promoting women in politics, needed in order to achieve a critical mass.

Moreover, only six of the sixteen participating political parties and blocs took advantage of fulfilling a voluntary gender quota, which as the OSCE explains, “entitles parties to a 10 per cent higher state subsidy by including 2 members of the underrepresented gender in each 10 positions on their lists.” However, it should be noted that women accounted for 28.7% of candidates, 31% of the party list candidates and 13% of the majoritarian candidates.

The reluctance of political parties to actively promote female politicians has resulted in some women asserting that Georgian society is not particularly interested in seeing women take on a greater role in politics.

Georgian Member of Parliament, Guguli Maghradze, suggested that “the public should demand an increased role for women in politics.” In order to achieve this, Maghradze suggested the development of “[public relations] projects [...] that will better inform our society as to how women can play a positive role in politics.”

Positively, it appears that Georgian attitudes towards women in political office have changed. Based on NDI surveys taken over the past year most Georgians are receptive to women in politics. When asked whether they would vote for a female candidate in the October elections, 69% of respondents answered in the affirmative. Moreover, a majority of respondents said they felt women performed equally or better than men as politicians. This is a big improvement from just six years ago, when a study of Georgian values showed that Georgian society did not view women as politicians, said Tamar Sabedashvili, with the United Nations Development Fund for Women in an interview with the Institute for War and Peace Reporting.

Bonnie Bernstorm, a Swedish Member of Parliament urged the conference participants to work together and be supportive of each other's efforts across party lines. “Female solidarity,” she stressed, “has greatly helped the advancement of women in politics as a whole.”

Representatives from the opposition United National Movement (UNM) party expressed their hope that further meetings will be organised on tangible issues on which all sides can work together to provide solutions. ■

Report prepared for CEW by Karina Gould

Women in the Georgian Parliament, October 2012*:

Georgian Dream: Manana Kobakhidze (M), Deputy Chairperson; Eka Beselia (M); Eliso Chaphidze (M); Nino Gogvadze (I); Irine Imerlishvili (L); Nana Keinishvili (L); Fati Khalvashi (M); Tinatin Khidasheli, (M); Maghradze Guguli (L); Ani Mirotdadze (L).

United National Movement: Tina Bokuchava (L); Khatuna Gogorishvili (L); Irma Nadirashvili (L); Mariam Sajaia (L); Chiora Taktakishvili (L); Marika Verulashvili (M).

Two Georgian Dream MPs, Maia Panjikidze (L) and Tina Tsulukiani (M) resigned their seats to take Ministerial positions

M = Majoritarian Member of Parliament

L = Party List Member of Parliament

*source: www.parliament.ge