

THE PRACTICE OF REALIZATION OF POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL RIGHTS OF THE ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS FOR GEORGIA'S 2020 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND 2021 LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

Georgia, as a transitional democracy, constantly undergoes reforms and transformations to develop into a consolidated democracy. Together with other pre-conditions, this goal first and foremost requires existence of structurally and institutionally sustainable as well as effectively functioning political parties and on the other hand healthy, competitive and fair election environment to allow the voters make a free choice from multiple options.

Public's quantitative and qualitative participation in the political and election process is vital, since it shapes general public attitudes and opinion vis-à-vis the entire process and at the same time provides ground for an in-depth discussion to what direction a country's participatory democracy process is headed.

As a result of hermeneutic analysis of elections hold in Georgia, we see emergence of a rather pessimistic trend that many voters are nihilistic vis-à-vis political and electoral processes in general which may be attributable to a number of mutually reinforcing factors. These factors include lack of adequate development level of the political parties which is clearly indicated by significant problems and challenges in terms of observing ethical and moral standards during the election process. The public's generally poor low political, civic and electoral culture is a no less important problem which in turn negatively affects electoral and political processes.

Unfavorable public attitude vis-à-vis public policy as well as political processes and institutions in general was an important factor for 2020 and 2021 electoral cycles.

According to the results of public opinion polls, published in August 2021 by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and CRRC-Georgia, public was pessimistic about country's direction and performance of the institutions. The citizens were expecting from the elected officials to carry out policies focused on the needs of population. In addition, political crisis in the country further undermined public trust in the country's direction and political leadership. Only quarter of the surveyed population believed that Georgia was going to the right direction and mere 35% thought there was a democracy in the country.

It is also noteworthy that as compared to August 2020 these figures significantly decreased in 2021.¹

¹ Public Attitudes in Georgia. The research conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and CRRC-Georgia, August, 2021.

When dealing with an issue of public participation in electoral and political processes, it is visible that there is a very acute problem of inclusivity of the ethnic minority groups.

Stakeholders are well aware that political and civic integration of the ethnic minorities, particularly in the regions with compact settlement of the ethnic minorities, has been an important challenge for Georgia. This also includes problems related to the electoral behavior.

Although voter turnout among the ethnic minorities is usually high, they still lack informed participation in the electoral processes and are not well-aware of their civic responsibility.

The in-depth analysis of electoral and political processes illustrates that groups traditionally belonging to the ethnic minorities are characterized with higher electoral vulnerability which in turn is attributable to a number of factors. These factors are as follows:

- Insufficient command of the Georgian language
- Low level of integration of the ethnic minorities into the country's political, socio-economic and cultural environment
- Limited access to the Georgian information resources due to language barrier
- Inadequate political communication between the center and periphery
- Insufficient political, civic and informed electoral participation culture among ethnic minority individuals
- Scarcity of regular and subject-matter discussions between the political parties and local community groups
- Lack of interest and will of the political parties vis-à-vis necessity of broader participation of the ethnic minorities in the political processes
- Political spectrum's imperfect perceptibility of real problems, concerns, needs, interests and challenges of the ethnic minorities and accordingly, lack of proper vision and political initiatives to respond them
- Alienation of the ethnic minority groups from the state and in some cases total lack of self-identification with the state

On top of these challenges there is another issue in terms of electoral vulnerability. Specifically, regions with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities have always been a significant source of votes for the ruling parties and therefore played an important role in providing legitimacy to the government.

Therefore, study of realization of political and electoral rights of the ethnic minority groups in the electoral process as well as definition and analysis of factors promoting or hindering political representation and electoral participation is of vital importance. This work, entitled as "Research On the Practice of Realization of Political and Electoral Rights of the Ethnic Minority Groups for Georgia's 2020 Parliamentary Elections and 2021 Local Self-Government Elections" is intended to address these issues.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to raise awareness among stakeholders about problems, concerns, needs and challenges associated with the process of proper realization of political and electoral rights of the ethnic minorities in Georgia.

Given the abovementioned, more effective forms and methods should be found to improve electoral and political environment in regions with the compact settlements of ethnic minorities on the one hand and on the other hand, wider quantitative and qualitative participation and representation of the minorities in the political and electoral processes should be encouraged.

The objective of this research is to study and analyze practice of realization of political and electoral rights of the ethnic minority groups for 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections.

Research Subject:

- Specification of the ethnic minority groups' representation and participation dynamic for 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections;
- Specification of factors promoting or hindering representation and participation of the ethnic minority groups in the political and electoral processes.
- Study of election administration's work performed as well as efforts directed for raising awareness of the ethnic minority groups about electoral participation.
- Comparative analysis of representation, participation and electoral behavior of the ethnic minority groups for 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections: electoral and political process in the regions of the ethnic minorities and general public attitudes vis-à-vis the process, need of participation in electoral and political processes, preferential attitudes vis-à-vis different types of elections, preferential approaches of support, support for the ruling party, support for the women candidates, etc.
- Systemic comparative analysis of 2020 parliamentary, 2021 local self-government and other previous elections: analysis of general political and electoral environment and observance of standards, level of awareness among voters about political parties and candidates as well as their political platforms, availability of information about political and electoral process and administration of electoral process.

Situational analysis of political and electoral processes in Georgia as well as participation of the ethnic minority groups in these processes demonstrate that research subject was of a complex nature which was taken into account for the research process planning and implementation phases.

The following methodological approaches were used in the research process:

A) Desk Research:

Empirical and theoretical methods of information analysis were used for the desk research process.

These methods were used to analyze and summarize interim and final outcomes as well as to produce package of recommendatory proposals for the interested parties to contribute further development of political and electoral processes in the regions with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities together with higher quantitative and qualitative participation of the ethnic minority groups in these processes.

Therefore, the sources studied and analyzed for the desk research format are as follows:

- Main findings identified as part of the monitoring programs carried out by Public Movement Multinational Georgia for 2016 Parliamentary, 2020 Parliamentary and 2021 Local Self-Government Elections as well as general outcomes of the electoral process (monitoring program reports which include assessments of both pre-election and post-election period as well as Election Day evaluation);
- Reports produced by different stakeholders, including the central authorities and the CEC, program documents of political parties as well as monitoring reports of local and international observation missions issued for 2016 Parliamentary, 2020 Parliamentary and 2021 Local Self-Government Elections.

B) Realization of focus groups as part of which preliminary empirical data was collected, processed and analyzed

As part of focus groups, preliminary information was collected from individuals living in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions and belonging to the ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, including local opinion leaders, entrepreneurs, local civil sector representatives as well as educators and media workers.

Of note is that qualitative difference between ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, in terms of political and electoral participation as well as social constructs on the ground were taken into account for the research process.

Therefore, social, traditional cultural and economic characteristics of both ethnic groups were taken into account in the process of realization of focus groups.

Given the research interests, political campaigns of political parties and candidates in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions were assessed in terms of observance of high ethical and moral standards. In addition, their program priorities and visions were

analyzed to understand how real concerns and challenges afflicting the ethnic minorities were reflected in campaign platforms.

One of the most valuable directions of this research is analysis of public policy implemented in regard to political representation and electoral participation of the ethnic minority groups as well as assessment of measures taken by relevant stakeholders to identify those positive or negative aspects which require further expansion on the one hand and timely and effective response on the other hand.

Within the scope of this research valuable effort was spent to study electoral behavior of ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani voters which is a cornerstone to determine what efforts should be made by all stakeholders, including political spectrum, public and civil sector, as well as media and international community to facilitate proper realization of political and electoral rights of the ethnic minority groups for elections in medium and long-term perspective.

In this respect, the research was focused particularly on study of the following issues:

- Importance of participation in elections and voting (factors determining participation and not participation)
- Which elections are most important
- What factors stipulate election of a specific political party (in the parliament, in municipality council);
- How often ruling party/politician gets support;
- How often one and the same political party/politician gets support
- How important it is to vote for a candidate of specific ethnic origin
- How important is to vote for a woman candidate
- What is the assessment of 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections;
- How informed were voters about every candidate/political party running in the 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections;
- How informed were voters about programs of candidates/political parties for the 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections;
- How reflection of problems/topics relevant for the ethnic minorities in the political party's program affected political choice?
- Participation/interest towards political events in a respective municipality;
- Recognizability of candidates for single-mandate constituency MP
- Assessment of election administration's performance for 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections
- Assessment of election environment for the ethnic minorities during 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections
- Comparative assessment of 2021 local self-government and 2020 parliamentary elections
- Measures taken to increase level of participation and representation of the ethnic minorities in the political and electoral processes
- Media environment and accessibility.

SUMMARY

Despite the Government of Georgia's open declaration of necessity of political participation of the minorities which is reflected in the National Concept of Tolerance and Civic Integration and respective action plans for 2009-2014, State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration and 2015-2020 Action Plan, 2021-2030 State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration and 2021-2022 Action Plan for implementation of this strategy as well as in National Human Rights Strategy and relevant actions plans, valuable participation of the ethnic minorities both in political space and political processes still persists as a serious challenge.

The government's strategic documents, together with respective action plans, envisage general facilitation of participation of the ethnic minorities in the political and electoral processes, although this facilitation is largely limited by measures oriented at raising awareness in the election process and is not supported by public institutional mechanisms and preferential policy which would encourage such political participation.

Therefore, the burden of facilitation of political participation of the ethnic minorities is fully delegated on the political parties which are capable to make their positive contribution in the political participation process of the ethnic minorities. Despite the abovementioned, their political will in this process is somehow limited due to a number of factors, including lack of legal incentive mechanisms for the political parties which would have encouraged their efforts to increase representation of the ethnic minorities in party lists and structure which is still a serious challenge and seemingly an insurmountable problem.

In light of identified challenges in regard to participation of the ethnic minorities in the political processes, performance of the election administration which sought to contribute higher quantitative participation of the ethnic minority voters in the electoral process as well promote their capability to make an informed choice, warrants positive appraisal for 2020 and 2021 election cycles.

In Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities and traditional high degree of electoral vulnerability it is still very relevant to conduct a political campaign based on high moral and political values. Unfortunately, several political parties and candidates disregarded rules provided in the Code of Conduct

for Political Parties² which was manifested in numerous facts of violence and physical assault and which further aggravated and polarized pre-election environment both for 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections.

In regard to electoral attitudes and behavior of ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian voters living in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti region, there were some interesting trends that were identified in the process of realization of focus groups as well as some which require further deliberation.

Across compact settlements of ethnic Azerbaijani community living in Kvemo Kartli region the widespread incentive to vote is to obtain certain reward (including financial reward) which obviously harms election environment in general and prospects of emergence and further progress of a consolidated democracy at a local level. Taking financial and other rewards in exchange of the vote has been transformed into some kind of a “lucrative business” at a local level. The similar trends have been identified across Samtskhe-Javakheti region populated with ethnic Armenian community, albeit to a lesser extent.

Both in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti region there is a growing potential of youth in terms of informed participation in the electoral process. This is attributable to the fact that young people who wish to enroll in universities, do study Georgian language both at higher educational facilities and during senior years at school which allows them to have unlimited access to electoral and political information. Rise in digital technologies together with social networks positively affected this process, since most of the young people are social network users and as compared to other age groups they have wider access to ongoing political and electoral processes in the country.

The trend of Armenian-speaking community being a traditional supporter of the ruling political party and politicians still persists. Among other factors, this is also largely stipulated by the desire to keep stability. In regard to the Azerbaijani-speaking community, traditional support for the ruling party deviated to some extent and therefore, interest in the opposition political parties and candidates has increased.

The representatives of both communities admit importance of supporting the ethnic minority candidate, although unequivocally stress significance of a candidate’s personal characteristics while making their political choice. There is a positive attitude across both communities in terms of supporting women candidates.

Generally, ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian communities were more or less aware of information about all candidates/political parties taking part in the elections. However, knowledge of most of public was limited by information about the ruling party and a number of the opposition parties.

Lack of communication and discussion between the electoral subjects and local voters

2 Code of Conduct for Political Parties. <https://cesko.ge/static/res/docs/CoC-final.pdf>

still persists. Ethnic minority communities were poorly informed about programs of candidates/political parties. Unfortunately, political parties' insufficient degree of perceptibility of the specific needs of the ethnic minorities and therefore, lack of reflection of political visions on how to respond to that challenge into a campaign documents, still remains a problem.

Voting process is seriously affected by circumstances such as family decisions, plea from family members and friends as well as leaders of Azerbaijani and Armenian communities (in Azerbaijani community it can also be an urging from a spiritual leader), direct and indirect pressure on voters from political parties and their representatives and desire to keep or remove ruling party political party/politicians from power.

On top of that, the following factors play an important role in terms of supporting a political party: political party ideology, political party program, pre-election town halls, personal characteristics of political party leaders at national and local levels, political parties' level of awareness of problems of local population, political parties' approach vis-à-vis issues related with the ethnic minorities, representation of relevant ethnic minority individuals in political party structures and party lists. With respect to the election of majoritarian candidate the choice is also shaped by the abovementioned factors.

In regard to circumstances hindering participation in elections/political processes, several factors are of particular interest: nihilism vis-à-vis elections and political processes, lack of faith in local politicians, negative expectation among public about inevitable falsification of elections and fact that none of the political parties/politicians were fit for the interests of a specific voter.

The limited access on information about all political parties and politicians still remains as one of the hindering factors for participation in election process at a local level which in turn deprives the voter a possibility to make choice from multiple options. On top of that, language barrier still remains as one of the challenges for knowledgeable participation in the elections.

Unfortunately, Azerbaijani-speaking and Armenian-speaking population's lack of access to information sources because of language barrier still poses an insurmountable challenge. Therefore, principal means of information for local population are news broadcasts either in the languages of the ethnic minorities or in Russian. As a result, local population is detached from the Georgian information environment which further worsens the prospects of their knowledgeable participation in the electoral process.

A regrettable trend has been identified in Kvemo Kartli region. In particular, there is a rising influence of a radical Islamist group at a local level which forbids ethnic Azerbaijani voters to take part in the elections. It is noteworthy that activities of the abovementioned group became particularly visible in the run-up of 2020 parliamentary elections. However, with respect to 2021 local self-government elections, activity of that group were not observed.

It can be argued with higher certainty that spread of the COVID-19 pandemic significant-

ly harmed election environment in both regions. This concerns particularly to political campaign process by the political parties and candidates. This challenge was especially important for 2020 election cycle.

Unfolding events in Nagorno-Karabakh in the run-up of 2020 parliamentary elections, which turned into a military hostility, negatively affected Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions with compact settlements of ethnic Azerbaijanis and Armenians in terms of conducting electoral and political processes in a healthy election environment. In the pre-election period there were public statements to foster hatred and confrontation between the two communities with overarching aim to manipulate ethno-patriotic sentiments for narrow partisan interests and mobilization/attraction of voters from respective ethnic group.

Therefore, instead of having a political dialogue and talking about election programs with the voters, some political party representatives deliberately made references to the relations between two ethnicities, encouraged sharp and contradictory attitudes between the two communities and used these communities for their political campaign purposes. Such circumstances and trends, however, were not identified for 2021 local self-government elections.

Of note is that as a result of statement of the United National Movement's leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, made in favor of Azerbaijan's claim about the status of Nagorno-Karabakh in light of erupted warfighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, election environment was substantially altered in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities. This statement significantly harmed the United National Movement's standing in Samtskhe-Javakheti region (whereas the opposing trend emerged in Kvemo Kartli region) which put the ruling party into an advantageous position for the parliamentary elections. The pre-election processes were basically conducted in a non-competitive environment. This trend was kept in place for the 2021 local self-government elections where the ruling party achieved landslide victory in Samtskhe-Javakheti region in the face of weak competition.

Given all the abovementioned, we may conclude that unfavorable practice of the ethnic minorities participation in the political and electoral process and insufficient realization of their rights in this regard is a significant obstacle for the development of participatory democracy in the country. This in turn will negatively affect the country's development status in general, especially in regions with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities.

DESK RESEARCH

Context of the Ethnic Minorities' Political Participation

According to the 2014 universal public census, carried out by the National Statistics Office of Georgia, ethnic minorities in Georgia account for 13.2% of the country's total population.³ The largest ethnic minority groups – Azerbaijanis (6.2%) and Armenians (4.5%) have compact settlements in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions.

Since the ethnic minorities account for nearly one sixth of the Georgian population, in order to facilitate development of participatory and consolidated democracy in Georgia it is important to take into account both civic and political integration dynamic of the ethnic minorities as well as problems, concerns and challenges identified in the process.

It is obvious that in order to properly address concerns in this regard problem assessment and analysis is needed directly from the perspective of the ethnic minorities as well as institutional barriers hindering political participation of the ethnic minorities should be studied.

Unfortunately, analysis of available facts and trends clearly indicate that political participation of the ethnic minorities and their representation in government structure both at local and central levels continues to be an important challenge. Therefore, their insufficient level of involvement in public policy and decision-making process further deepens the sense of alienation among the ethnic minorities.

There have been some shifts since 2012 to contribute to civic and political integration of the ethnic minorities. The State Ministry of Reintegration was renamed into State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. The mandate of the government interagency commission has also expanded. In 2015, the Government of Georgia adopted a Decree on approval of State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration and 2015-2020 Action Plan (2015). One of the important objectives of the strategy is support of ethnic minorities as part of which the government took obligation to satisfy their educational and legal needs as well as ensure introduction of teaching of relevant ethnic languages in educational facilities.

³ Universal public census of the population of Georgia: www.geostat.ge

The practice of the ethnic minorities' civic participation in the last few years, which demonstrated that the ethnic minorities possess capacity to get involved in the civil processes, should be considered as a positive aspect. The government to some extent facilitates institutional mechanisms of communication. The Ethnic Minority Council, which is a consultative body at the Office of Public Defender of Georgia, has been active since 2005 as a source of communication and consultation between the government and ethnic minorities.

The Ethnic Minority Council (EMC), within the scope of its competencies, is authorized to voice any problem related to the ethnic minorities, produce political recommendations and advocate them at a national level. Of note is that in the past few years, EMC's mandate has been widened substantially and it now includes monitoring and assessment of implementation of National Concept of Tolerance and Civic Integration.

The situation is different when it comes to the ethnic minorities' political participation. In particular, the integration of ethnic minorities in Georgia's political space have not yet been properly realized.

Despite the Government of Georgia openly declaring necessity of political participation of the minorities which is reflected in the National Concept of Tolerance and Civic Integration and respective action plans for 2009-2014, as well as State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration and 2015-2020 Action Plan, no effective measures have been taken in this respect.

The analysis of the last years' practice illustrates that participation of the ethnic minorities in general political processes does not depend on established institutional mechanisms and preferential policy, but on decisions and goodwill of political parties and various political leaders instead. Therefore, existence of political will at a state level would be enough to realize political interests of the minorities, although this still remains a challenge.

The government policy to encourage political participation of the ethnic minorities is not systemic in nature but fragmented and its long-term correction would be possible by introducing such institutional or legislative mechanisms as adoption of financial incentive system for political parties if they nominate the ethnic minority candidates in their party lists, introduction of quota mechanisms to achieve increased representation of the ethnic minorities in Georgia's legislative and local self-government organs as well as existence of political parties expressing interests of the ethnic minorities.

Notwithstanding these initiatives which, if implemented, would significantly contribute to the political participation of the ethnic minorities, the state administration system remains passive in terms of pushing for mechanisms facilitating involvement of the minorities in the socio-political processes.

Although the 2021-2030 State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration and 2021-2022 Action Plan for implementation of this strategy envision addressing "equality, civic and political participation" problems of the minorities, activities provided by the action plan are limited by measures which have to be taken by electoral administration to increase

electoral participation. In particular: trainings for self-government employees of the regions with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities, preparation of CEC information videos in Armenian and Azerbaijani languages, translation of election documentation and other information materials into Armenian and Azerbaijani languages, implementation of “Talk to the Voters” information campaign, organization of “Election Development School” across four municipalities with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities, implementation of education program “Elections and Young Voters” across 13 municipalities with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities, offering training module “Election Law” to the students of Samtskhe-Javakheti State University (Akhaltzikhe).

The 2014-2020 National Human Rights Strategy envisaged participation of the ethnic minorities in political processes. In particular, to ensure inclusive election environment, participation of the ethnic minorities in political decision-making process and aiding to make an informed choice. CEC and LEPL Electoral Systems Development, Reforms and Training Centre were responsible for realization of such type of rights.

Of note is that participation in political decision-making process was not discussed in a wider format (for instance at civil councils, community unions) and included electoral processes. In addition, performance reports showed that there was overlap of indicators for different objectives (for instance, in objective 10.2 of 2016-2017 action plan, translation of election materials into languages spoken by the ethnic minorities was one and the same fulfillment indicator of different objectives).

In terms of political participation, of note are instruments to incentivize participation in elections for the ethnic minorities. These instruments are provided by the action plan of National Human Rights Strategy: Translation of election materials, election education programs (for instance, “Election Development School”), raising awareness among the ethnic minorities about the government’s civic integration policy as well as raising awareness with respect to the European integration policy.

It is obvious that on the one hand, the government strategy indeed stimulates participation of the ethnic minorities in the elections. However, beyond the electoral processes, facilitation of participation in political life is limited by awareness rising measures alone. For instance, there is no emphasis to support the ethnic minorities to take part in municipality council as well as to provide other means to ensure their involvement in decision-making process in local unions and local level.

Of additional note is that since 2018, professional development of ethnic minority public servants has been highlighted in the action plan. In this regard, emphasis is made on professional development only and there is no discernible attempt to develop real, effective mechanisms to encourage political participation.

Given the abovementioned it is evident that prospects of the ethnic minorities’ political participation depend on goodwill of political parties, instead of having relevant and effective stimulating measures at the state level.

If we take a look at previous election cycles, it is visible that there is an insufficient political

will to reflect interests of the ethnic minorities at legislative, executive and local self-government system, barring some exceptions.

As current practice illustrates, major political parties are less interested to have ethnic minority individuals involved in their party structures which in turn is reflected on lack of minorities in the party lists. Therefore, main responsible organizations which can make positive contribution in the ethnic minorities' political participation process are political parties, albeit their effectiveness is limited.

In regard to parliamentary elections with majoritarian system, ethnic minorities have guaranteed representation only in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda electoral districts where the ethnic Armenians constitute absolute majority of the local population. In other districts with compact settlement of the ethnic minorities, election of the ethnic minority candidates depended on the will of a political party whether or not to nominate ethnic minority representative.

The representation of the ethnic minorities in Georgia's executive government is very limited. Individuals from the ethnic minorities can be found at mid-level and lower-level positions of the executive government which cannot be considered as a positive practice.

Representation of the ethnic minorities in the Parliament of Georgia still remains low. Moreover, the situation with this respect has been deteriorating lately. As a result of 2020 elections six MPs from the ethnic minorities gained seats in the Parliament of Georgia whereas in 2016 and 2012 their number was 11 and 8, respectively. Of note is that even in 2016 when the number of MPs from the ethnic minorities was the highest for that period of time, total number of ethnic minorities to parliamentary representation ratio was still remarkably low.

Against this backdrop some interesting trends have been identified in regard to participation of the ethnic minorities in at regional and local self-government levels.

In particular, self-governance in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki municipalities of Samtskhe-Javakheti region is fully exercised by the representatives of ethnic Armenian community who occupy positions of high-ranking officials (mayor, deputy mayor, heads of services, etc).

For 2021 election cycle, Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki are still leaders in terms of wide representation of the ethnic minorities in local self-government bodies. In Ninotsminda, where the ethnic minorities constitute 95.8% of the local population, 29 out of 30 members of municipality councils are from the ethnic minorities. Akhalkalaki municipality council also has wide representation of the ethnic minorities (35 members out of 42) where 93.15% of the local population is ethnic Armenian.

As opposed to Samtskhe-Javakheti, situation is different in Kvemo Kartli region with compact settlements of ethnic Azerbaijani population where local ethnic Azerbaijani community only fragmentally and imperfectly shares local self-government. In addition, ethnic Azerbaijanis have never held position of mayor/head of municipality.

The 2016 survey carried out by Green Caucasus in Kvemo Kartli demonstrated that the ethnic minorities account for 17% only of total public servants in municipalities of this region whereas non-dominant ethnic groups constitute 49%⁴ in the same municipalities. Individuals of Azerbaijani ethnicity have only marginal representation at top positions which are mostly occupied by ethnic Georgian nationals (all important positions are taken by the Georgians, barring some rare exceptions).

Across Kvemo Kartli region, Marneuli district where ethnic Azerbaijanis constitute 91.4% of local population, leads in terms of representation of the ethnic minorities elected in the aftermath of 2021 local self-government elections. In 33-member local municipality council ethnic Azerbaijanis have 17 members. Marneuli is followed by Bolnisi where out of 36 members of municipality council 15 are ethnic minority representatives. Ethnic minorities in Bolnisi constitute 69% of the local population. Of note is that ethnic minorities in Dmanisi constitute 66.8% of the local population, although their representation in the municipality council is very modest – 10 members of out of total 38. In addition, the ethnic minorities possess very few mandates in Tsalka – 11 out of total 30 – although the ethnic minorities in Tsalka constitute 53.3% of the local population.⁵

Certainly, representation of the ethnic minorities in the local self-government organs still remains a challenge which is to some extent attributable to the reduction of number of majoritarian candidates as part of the legislative reform.

The abovementioned figures which show poor representation of the ethnic minorities in local or national government representative bodies obviously fuels alienation of the ethnic minorities vis-à-vis state institutions and undermines trust in them which eventually hinders prospects of building inclusive democracy in the country.

Activities of the Election Administration Within the Context of Provision Inclusive Election Environment for the Ethnic Minority Voters

In light of challenges identified with respect to participation of the ethnic minorities in socio-political processes, activities of the election administration in terms of promoting higher quantitative and qualitative involvement of the minorities in the election process warrants positive appraisal.

A permanent working group has been set up and launched as part of the Central Election Commission to ensure equal election environment for the ethnic minority voters. This group consists of members of election administration, international and local NGOs, state institutions and Public Defender's Office (relevant invited representatives working on issues of the ethnic minorities). This group discusses problems, concerns and challenges

4 <https://www.asocireba.ge/files/Qvemo-Kartli-regional-plans-analysis.pdf>

5 For more details, see PMMG's Final Monitoring Report for 2021 Local Self-Government Elections

which the ethnic minorities have to face within the electoral context. CEC annual action plan includes measures focused on the ethnic minorities.

To facilitate inclusive election environment for the ethnic minorities, election administration took a number of measures for 2020 and 2021 election cycles to contribute higher quantitative participation of the ethnic minority voters in the electoral process as well as develop their abilities to make an informed choice.

In the run-up to the 2020 parliamentary elections, the election administration carried out voter education activities. The election administration was informing voters, including the ethnic minorities and youth in regard to parliamentary elections, as well as spreading information about new legislative amendments, novel coronavirus infection and regulations produced by the election administration to curb its spread together with explanation of procedures and importance of voting.

In this respect, the election administration continued positive practice for 2021 local self-government elections, in particular 358 polling stations were set up in majoritarian districts with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities. Of that amount, 211 were Georgian/Azerbaijani polling stations, 133 were Georgian/Armenian polling stations and 4 were Georgian/Armenian/Azerbaijani polling stations. For precinct election commission members guiding instructions and poster on sealing election documentation were prepared in languages they speak.⁶

In order to inform ethnic minorities, the CEC published information about the elections on its website's "Ethnic Minorities" banner. This information also includes the CEC ordinance which determines set of sanitary-hygienic requirements for campaign events and the Election Day to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The CEC, through its website, made available unified voters list (voters.cec.gov.ge) to the voters living in the regions with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities. In addition, the CEC also provided services of phone/information center as well as information videos and posters posted at polling station for the voters and other stakeholders.

Election administration has put important efforts to promote inclusive election environment in districts with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities. The following activities have been carried out as part of voter information campaign:

- All election-related videos, including suggested services, produced by the election administration have been translated into Armenian and Azerbaijani languages and broadcasted through TV and radio stations of the relevant regions.
- It was possible to receive information in Armenian and Azerbaijani languages from the CEC's phone/information center.
- People living in the regions with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities were able to check themselves in the unified voters' list and get information in Geor-

6 CEC – Report of 2021 Municipal Elections.

gian-Armenian and Georgian-Azerbaijani languages.

- There was awareness campaign “Talking with the Voters” and as part of this campaign, voters were informed at public venues. As part of this campaign, election administration workers, joined by the volunteers, hold meetings with the citizens and provided them information about voting process, available communication channels between election administration and citizens as well as about services offered to the voters. Information leaflets in both Armenian and Azerbaijani languages were distributed during these meetings.
- The following documents, needed to help voters cast their votes, have been translated into Armenian and Azerbaijani languages: ballot paper, ballot paper fill out rule, unified voters’ list (wall list and desk list) and poster which depicts voting process.
- CEC chairperson, Giorgi Kalandarishvili and one of his deputies, Giorgi Sioridze, met with local youth on 24 September in Marneuli and on 25 September in Akhalkalaki. At those meetings, CEC officials presented reforms implemented in the Central Election Commission and spoke about new rules of staffing of election administration, including district and precinct election commissions. The youth were allowed an opportunity to give questions to the CEC chairperson on issues of their interest and raise other problematic and important issues.⁷

CEC and LEPL Electoral Systems Development, Reforms and Training Centre carried out five education projects including ones in the elections districts with compact settlements of the ethnic minorities. In total 15,503 individuals took part in these projects:

- Election administrator courses for potential members of election commissions
- Information training program “Elections and Young Voter” at public schools
- Election Law
- Youth Camps
- Election Development School

Of additional note is the election administration’s activities for capacity development of the ethnic minority members of the precinct election commissions. Central Election Commission ensured training of the ethnic minority PEC members in the matters of election procedures and provided translation of election documentation for them into Armenian and Azerbaijani languages.

In those districts with ethnic minority settlements where language barrier is not an issue for the ethnic minorities, trainings organized for the PEC members were delivered in Georgian language and in districts where language barrier is an issue trainings were delivered in Georgian as well as in Azerbaijani and Armenian languages.

FOCUS GROUPS

Election Environment for Georgia's 2020 Parliamentary Elections and 2021 Local Self-Government Elections

The participants of the focus group pushed forward an idea that 2020 parliamentary elections were worse as compared to 2016 parliamentary elections which was manifested in unsatisfactory work of the election administration (poor competence of the precinct election commission members), lack of political competition at a local level and imperfect political campaign as result of the coronavirus pandemic-induced problems.

In addition, part of the focus group participants claimed that for 2020 parliamentary elections, Armenian-speaking and Azerbaijani-speaking population had their attention shifted to hostilities in Karabakh which affected their electoral behavior and political choice. Mikheil Saakashvili's statement about war fighting in Karabakh played a role in favor of the ruling party in Samtskhe-Javakheti region and as a result the United National Movement's support there declined in 2020. This trend continued for 2021 elections. The opposite trend has been identified in Kvemo Kartli region for both election cycles.

According to the focus group participants, malignant practice of politically-motivated dismissals from jobs was still topical in 2021. In addition, incumbent mayors and municipality council members actively used government resources for political campaign purposes during 2021 local self-government elections. The years-long practice, such as growth of local budget prior to the launch of electoral campaign, remained unaltered in 2021 as well.

Of note is that as compared to 2020, election environment in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions for 2021 local self-government elections were less aggressive and fewer facts of violence were identified. However, of mention is a novelty when political party candidates targeted with supposedly violently methods were forced to withdraw from races which was a rather topical issue in Samtskhe-Javakheti region in the pre-election period.

The focus group participants opine that election environment for 2021 local self-government elections had several positive shifts as compared to the previous elections which they believe can be largely attributable to the effective performance of the election administration. However, Marneuli electoral district, where numerous shortcomings were identified during the first round, was an exception in this regard.

Electoral Preferences of the Ethnic Minorities

The traditional trend of local Armenian-speaking community's support for the ruling party and politicians was again highlighted and according to the focus group participants, this is attributable to the desire of stability. According to the focus group participants, financial incentive and wish to find employment in public sector is to some extent a factor to support the ruling party.

In the process of realization of focus groups, a very interesting and at the same time thought-provoking trend which concerns ethnic Azerbaijani community, has been identified. Traditionally, ethnic Azerbaijani community, demonstrated high level of support for the ruling political party through many years.

Nevertheless, this traditional support for the ruling party somehow deviated for 2016 and 2020 parliamentary elections and consequently, interest in the opposition political parties and candidates has surged.

As clarified by the focus group participants, dwindling interest vis-à-vis the ruling political party among local voters is attributable to a number of factors, including institutional strength and robust engagement of the United National Movement in Kvemo Kartli region, positive attitudes vis-à-vis the United National Movement leader (Mikheil Saakashvili) among local community as well as certain skepticism towards the ruling political party among local public which is largely stipulated by nepotism, corruption, injustice and lack of meritocracy in the public administration process.

This may explain why there is a certain category of voters within local community which would take part in elections in order to see ruling political elite's defeat and to this aim vote for a political party/politician which they did not favor.

Motivation to Get Financial Benefit

As a result of focus group survey, carried out within ethnic Azerbaijani community, it was identified that unfortunately, across compact settlements of ethnic Azerbaijani community living in Kvemo Kartli region the widespread incentive to vote is to obtain certain reward (including financial reward) which obviously harms election environment in general and prospects of emergence and further progress of a consolidated democracy at a local level. Taking financial and other rewards in exchange of the vote has established into some kind of a "lucrative business" at a local level.

It is noteworthy that among the Armenian-speaking community there is a motivation to take part in the elections to get some reward, including financial reward, can also be discerned, albeit at a smaller scale. According to the focus group participants, taking part in the elections for certain financial reward is more widespread in rural as compared to urban areas.

Election of the Ethnic Minority Candidates

In regard to election of the ethnic minority candidates, it turned out that importance is attached to the qualitative (and not quantitative) representation of people with specific ethnic roots in the ranks of political party. According to the focus group participants, election of the ethnic minority candidates is an important factor, but quality is more important than quantity. They believe that if a candidate is only a nominal figure and cannot solve problems of a local community then the ethnic origin of such candidate is no longer a factor while making choice and it will no longer affect what decision is made.

Of additional note is that there is no particular problem at a local level that would hinder voting for an ethnic Georgian candidate if needed, including for mayor.

Women Candidates

There are positive expectations in terms of supporting women candidates. For local voters, voting for a woman candidate does not pose any kind of a serious challenge. The focus group participants state that a candidate's sex in general does not matter while making decision and here attention is paid what political party does a candidate represent. Despite the abovementioned, a trend has been identified in Kvemo Kartli region that elderly segment of ethnic Azerbaijani population, as opposed to the youth, are more interested in male candidates.

Political Parties and Election Programs

According to the general assessment, ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian communities were more or less aware of information about all candidates/political parties taking part in the elections. However, knowledge of most of public was limited by information about the ruling party and a number of opposition parties.

As stated by one of the focus group's participants, certain category of voters does not possess information about the parties although they know parties' election numbers, for instance "41" and "5" which they use to make their choice. This is a widespread trend across Kvemo Kartli region. Ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian communities were mostly informed about activities and candidates of the ruling political party and the United National Movement.

Unfortunately, the lack of communication and discussion between the electoral subjects and local voters still persists. For instance, ethnic minority communities were poorly informed about programs of candidates/political parties.

Mostly, during the town halls organized by candidates/political parties, they voiced only general, verbal election messages and failed to communicate full-fledged, comprehensive and documented program principles and policy initiatives. This trend continues to pose a serious challenge to carry out political campaign at a local level where verbal pledges continue to dominate without presenting a specific election program in a written form.

Political Parties' Perceptibility of the Problems of the Ethnic Minorities

Political parties do not possess necessary information about the problems of the ethnic minorities and therefore do not offer solutions for these problems to the voters. It was clearly identified during the pre-election period that candidates/political parties are less focused on specific concerns, problems and needs of the ethnic minority groups and therefore do not produce well-thought, structured and sustainable visions (policy issues, program initiatives, reformist visions, etc) to respond to the existing challenges.

According to the local Armenian-speaking community, although candidates/political parties talked about issues relevant for the ethnic minorities such as land ownership, citizenship, etc parties lack systemic vision to deal with specific needs of the minorities and therefore have no specific policy initiatives and reformist proposals in this regard.

The general idea of the local Armenian-speaking community about this issue which is in line with the attitudes of Azerbaijani-speaking community in Kvemo Kartli region is as follows: "They do not even have political programs presented while meeting the population leaving aside visions how to respond to the problems of the minorities."

Therefore, during the pre-election meetings, emphasis is made on finding solutions for local social problems facing the community instead of presenting sustainable and long-term program that would support integration.

In addition, focus group participants stated that general information about the program visions of the parties was available to a certain degree, although mostly in the internet and social networks which are not accessible for every age group of the local voters.

Conditions Promoting Participation in Elections/Political Process

According to the focus group participants, participation in elections is very important and therefore they almost always vote. The participants also explained that for ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian voters parliamentary and local self-government elections are equally important.

Despite the abovementioned, participants of the focus group came to an idea that local voters may have stronger interest in local self-government elections, since level of communication and mutual involvement of both voters and candidates are higher. In addition, it is public perceptibility that local self-government bodies possess functional mandate to respond to local problems and challenges and therefore city hall and municipality council are capable to alleviate community concerns. Consequently, local self-government elections are considered as an important instrument to deal with local problems and participation there is somehow important.

According to the focus group participants, one of the factors pushing for participation in elections and voting among local ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijan voters is their general perception that voting is their right and obligation.

Ethnic minority representatives believe that by participation in elections they elect their own future. However, informed involvement and awareness of their civic responsibility is still low among these groups. In addition, desire to take part in election process is to a certain extent stipulated by the interest of voters to support that candidate/party which they trust and like.

It was identified that mostly, when voting for a particular political party, importance is attached to the leader of that party and when electing a particular politician importance is attached to the party which this politician represents.

Apart from this finding, it is noteworthy that voting pattern of the ethnic minority voters is seriously affected by circumstances such as family decisions, plea from family members and friends as well as urging from leaders of Azerbaijani and Armenian communities (in Azerbaijani community it can also be an urging from a spiritual leader), direct or indirect pressure from political parties and their representatives on voters and desire to keep or remove ruling party political party/politicians from power.

It was also stated that population took part in elections because it was forced by political party/party representative and agitators (largely hinting support of the ruling political party from employees of the public sector) or in hopes of gaining certain benefit (including financial benefit).

On top of that, given the attitudes among ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, the following factors play an important role in terms of making a choice and supporting a political party: political party ideology, political party program, pre-election town halls, personal characteristics of political party leaders at national and local levels, political parties' degree of awareness of problems of local population, political parties' approach vis-à-vis issues related with the ethnic minorities, representation of relevant ethnic minority individuals in political party structures and party lists.

It turned out that choice of the ethnic minorities for 2020-2021 elections to elect political parties or majoritarian candidates was also stipulated by the abovementioned factors.

Conditions Hindering Participation in Elections/Political Process

There is still a great deal of nihilism vis-à-vis electoral and political processes at the local level and, therefore, a lack of interest to participate which is mostly attributable to several factors. These factors are lack of faith in local politicians, negative expectation among public about inevitable falsification of elections and fact that none of the political parties/politicians were fit for the interests of a specific voter.

It is also noteworthy that limited access on information about all political parties and politicians still remains as one of the hindering factors for participation in election process at a local level which in turn deprives the voter a possibility to make choice from multiple options.

Yet another factor that focus group participants named as hindering factor to participate

in elections is the pandemic and infection of voters. The focus group participants stated voter who were infected and therefore eligible to request mobile ballot box at home were unaware of their rights whereas those who did have information were not in fact able to register because of tight deadline. Therefore, the focus group participants believe those individuals were deprived possibility to take part in elections.

In particular, the trends that pushed voters not to participate in elections are as follows:

Nihilism: There is a widespread assumption among Armenian-speaking and Azerbaijani-speaking communities that participation in elections makes no sense, because casting a vote will not change anything. There is also a public opinion that election results are pre-determined and therefore taking part would only be a formality.

Distrust vis-à-vis election administration: There is smaller, albeit still a trend that local population believes in inevitable election fraud and participation is inadvisable. In regard to refusal to participate in elections, some part of local ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian voters think that nothing will change by taking part in elections because elections in Georgia are rigged.

Distrust vis-à-vis political system and politicians: Among those people who do not participate in elections there are some who distrust local politicians. As stated by one of the participants of the focus group, local politicians do not remember their problems: “They recall our problems only before the elections so that we help them.”

Absence of desirable candidate: One of the factors triggering indifference vis-à-vis the electoral process is absence of a desirable political party / candidate for the voters which would express their interests and therefore could get their support. This is a clear manifestation of rising demand among local public for appearance of new political actors as well as desire to make choice among multiple options. This is particularly true given the fact that quite considerable part of population does not trust local politicians.

Language Barrier: Language barrier still remains one of the challenges in terms of informed participation of the ethnic minorities in the elections, although some political parties and candidate carry out campaign in languages spoken by the minorities and therefore ensure that campaign materials are distributed in Azerbaijani and Armenian languages.

Radical Attitudes: During process of realization of focus group a regrettable trend has been identified in Kvemo Kartli region. In particular, there is a rising influence of a radical Islamist group at a local level which forbids ethnic Azerbaijani voters to take part in the elections. It is noteworthy that activities of the abovementioned group became particularly visible in the run-up of 2020 parliamentary elections. However, with respect to 2021 local self-government elections, involvement of that group was not observed.

Labor Migration: Certain part of the local Armenian-speaking community is unable to participate in the electoral process because they are labor migrants abroad.

Access to Information

According to the information of the participants of the focus groups, in order to get information about 2020-2021 elections, local ethnic communities made use of internet, as well as got information from family, colleagues and friends about political and electoral processes across country in general and in relevant municipality in particular.

The participants of the focus groups believe that the number of internet users has increased significantly, especially among youth and some part of the voters get their news precisely from the internet.

Unfortunately, Azerbaijani-speaking and Armenian-speaking population's lack of access to information sources because of language barrier still poses an insurmountable challenge. Therefore, principal means of information for local population are news broadcasts in the languages of the ethnic minorities or in Russian. As a result, local population is detached from the Georgian information environment which further worsens the prospects of their knowledgeable participation in the electoral process.

This problem is equally important but in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions. In particular, in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda municipalities where most of people cannot speak Georgian. In these two municipalities the most viewed TV channels are Armenian and Russian networks which in turn limits possibility for local Armenian-speaking community to get information about ongoing processes in Georgia, including political and electoral processes.

As a result, Armenian-speaking population's possibility to make informed and knowledgeable choice at the elections is significantly undermined. There is a more promising situation in Akhaltsikhe municipality where knowledge of Georgian is relatively high among Armenian-speaking community and ethnic minorities living there can get information from Georgian news outlets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given all the abovementioned circumstances, following systemic measures need to be taken to ensure full-fledged participation of the ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities in the political and electoral processes. These measures include:

- **Facilitation of political participation of the ethnic minority individuals:** Introduction of legal incentive mechanisms for the political parties that would contribute higher representation of the ethnic minority individuals in party lists. In particular, an incentive mechanism need to be added to the Organic Law of Georgia On Citizens' Political Unions which would provide financial incentives to a political party to ensure higher representation of the ethnic minority individuals into their electoral lists.
- **Development of an inclusive election environment:** Election stakeholders should invest valuable efforts to implement measures aimed at development of inclusive political and electoral environment. This means that each and every voter, notwithstanding his/her ethnic origins, should be equipped with equal opportunity to participate in the electoral process and ensure his/her political representation
- **Improvement of the election administration's activities:** Improvement of the election administration's activities, raising level of competence of precinct election commission members, making bigger emphasis on qualifications of the candidates during the election commission members' selection process.
- **Political campaign in observance of ethical principles:** Facilitation of political campaigns based on higher moral and ethical standards, etc. It is important that higher ethical standards are followed and stronger focus is made on visions provided in political platforms rather than making statements to harm the opponent's image, discredit him/her and spread disinformation.
- **Prevention use of administrative resources:** Increased accountability and transparency of the local government, providing information to local information about the government's activities and spending. Refraining from use of administrative resources during the pre-election campaign.
- **Ensuring free election environment:** Rights and freedoms of all parties involved in the electoral process should be respected to make sure that political campaign as well as sending/promoting political messages to the voters happen in a free environment. Prevention of controlled voting, intimidation or bribing of voter while making a political choice.

- **Raising the level of awareness:** Raising the level of awareness of the ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani voters in their respective languages, candidates and political parties holding face-to-face meetings with local population during the pre-election period as well as political parties distributing electoral programs and election materials to the ethnic minorities printed in languages they speak, expanding access to the internet.
- **Capacity development for the ethnic minority youth:** Capacity development of ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian youth and realization of additional public and civic programs (organization of political and election schools, etc). Prevention of factors that stipulate expansion of influence of radical Islamist groups (subculture) over local youth.
- **Mainstreaming of problems facing the ethnic minorities by the political parties and developing visions for their solution:** Candidates and political parties should properly perceive and understand real problems and concerns which the ethnic minority communities face. In addition, they have to elaborate specific visions to deal with important issues and reflect them in election programs.

Aggregated Data of Focus Groups for 2020 Parliamentary and 2021 Local Self-Government Election Cycles

Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda and Akhaltsikhe -

Samtskhe-Javakheti Region

Participation in Elections

According to the focus group participants, electoral participation is extremely important and therefore they always take part in elections.

General Factors Stipulating (Facilitating) Electoral Participation and Voting

According to the focus group participants, one of the factors that facilitates electoral participation and voting is both civic responsibility and desire to get that political party / candidate elected which they trust and like.

Despite the abovementioned, there are a number of factors which also affect population's interest and desire to participate in elections and vote. Of these factors are pleas from family members and friends as well as urging from leaders of the local Armenian-speaking community.

It is noteworthy that among the Armenian-speaking community a motivation to take part in the elections to get some reward, including financial reward or any other reward, can also be discerned, albeit at a smaller scale.

There is also a trend that some (modest) portion of population participates in election with the desire to replace the ruling party.

General Factors Stipulating Refusal (Not Facilitating) of Electoral Participation

Some people from the local Armenian-speaking community cannot participate in the elec-

toral process since they are involved in agricultural works or are abroad as labour migrants. This problem has been identified in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki municipalities.

There is a widespread assumption among the local Armenian-language community that participation in elections makes no sense as casting a vote will change nothing. The public attitude prevalent in the local community clearly indicates skeptical approach of Armenian-speaking community vis-à-vis activities of political party or candidate which were elected. In particular, the prevalent idea in the local community is that “pledges remain unfulfilled and political programs find no real reflection in the subsequent activities of the politicians.”

There is also a public sentiment that election results are pre-determined and therefore participation in elections is merely a formality.

There is a minor trend that elections will be rigged and participation is only a “waste of time.”

Of note is that lack of trust in politicians at a local level is one of the major factors that pushes some part of the Armenian-speaking community away from participation in elections.

Of additional note is that the local Armenian-language community considers both local self-government and parliamentary elections to be equally important. Despite this, it is noticeable, albeit slightly that the Armenian-speaking community takes more interest in local self-government elections.

This attitude may be attributable to fact that local self-government organs are better fit to respond to the concerns and problems of the local population. In addition, given the nature of governance, it is local self-government with which the population has to interact to alleviate local problems and concerns. Therefore, the level of perceptibility of the importance and need of self-government is high among local population.

Advantages to take part in the electoral process

A number of interesting trends has been identified with respect of election a **specific political party** in the national legislative organ and municipality council.

According to the sentiments prevalent in the Armenian-speaking community, the factors which play an important role for the Armenian-speaking voters in making a decision and supporting a political party, are as follows: political party ideology, political party’s program, pre-election town halls, personal factors of political party leadership at national and local levels, family decision, personal connections, political party’s degree of awareness of local population’s problems, advice from the community leader, approach of a political party vis-à-vis the ethnic minority issues and representation of relevant ethnic minority people in political party structures as well as in party lists.

In regard to election of a specific **politician**, for instance as an MP, mayor of municipality council member, preferences are shaped on the basis of such factors as politician's personal qualities, candidate's election program, pre-election town halls, family, decision, personal connections, candidate's degree of awareness of local population's problems, advice from the community leader and candidate's local team.

It is also noteworthy that traditional trend of local Armenian-speaking community throwing support behind the ruling political party and politicians remains strong which to some extent is attributable to a sense of stability and positive expectations.

On top of that, supporting the candidate hailing from the ethnic Armenian community is crucial very important for the local Armenian-speaking community. However, when speaking about election of ethnic Georgian mayor, they express readiness for that.

There is still a certain (modest) category of voters in the local community which would participate in elections only because to see the ruling political elite defeated and to this aim would support political party/candidate unfavorable for them.

In regard to supporting women candidates there are positive expectations, although local Armenian-speaking community takes less interest in gender equality themes.

Electoral Behavior – 2020 Parliamentary Elections and 2021 Local Self-Government Elections

According to the assessment of the focus group, 2020 parliamentary elections were more free as compared to 2016 elections, although there were also some shortcomings. The participants of the focus group claimed that 2020 elections were more significant and therefore participation was very important. These attitudes were identical vis-à-vis 2021 local self-government elections which together with having the abovementioned characteristics was also conducted in a relatively peaceful environment.

In regard to population's interest and proactive involvement in the election lists, it is safe to say that most of population did not verify themselves in voter lists prior the Election Day. Moreover, big majority of the population was not even informed about such possibility. This trend has been identified both at 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections.

Some interesting trends have been identified with respect to factors of participation or non-participation in 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections among the local Armenian-speaking community.

As clarified by the focus group participants, desire to vote among some part of voters who indeed participate in 2020 and 2021 elections was largely attributable to the following circumstances: existence of desirable candidate/political party and will to elect them as well as request from a family member, friend or community leader.

In addition, it was also stated that in some, isolated cases voters participated in elections under pressure of political party / party representatives and agitators (largely implying support for the ruling party from the employees in public sector) as well as out of desire to get some reward, including a financial remuneration.

In regard to those voters who did not participate in 2020 and 2021 elections their decision was attributable to several reasons. In particular, they thought that one vote would not have changed anything, none of the political parties/politicians suited interests of a specific voter and there was a lack of faith in local politicians.

An interesting trend has also been identified with respect to voting or not voting for **majoritarian candidates** during 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections.

That segment of local voters who casted their votes for a specific majoritarian candidates made their political choice based on such circumstances as candidate's personal qualities, ethnic origins, candidate's political program (which mostly consisted verbal pledges), political party which candidate represented, pre-election town halls, leadership (both at national and local levels) of the political party which candidate represented, family decisions, personal familiarity, candidate's degree of awareness of problems of local population, advise from the community leader as well as composition and reputation of candidate's local team.

In regard to **election of a political party for 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections** it was stipulated by the following factors: political party ideology and program, pre-election town halls, reputation of political party leadership at local and national levels, family decision, personal familiarity, advise from the community leader, political party's team, approach of a political party vis-à-vis ethnic minority issues and qualitative (instead of quantitative) representation of a specific ethnic minority people in the ranks of a political party.

According to the general assessment, local Armenian-speaking community was more or less aware of information about all candidates/political parties taking part in the 2020-2021 elections. However, knowledge of most of public was limited by information about the ruling party and a number of opposition parties.

Of additional note is that the local Armenian-speaking community was less informed about programs of candidates / political parties. Unfortunately, the lack of subject-matter communication and discussion formats between the electoral subjects and local voters still persists.

Mostly, during the town halls organized by candidates/political parties, they voiced only general, verbal election messages and failed to communicate full-fledged, comprehensive and documented program principles and political initiatives.

This trend continues to pose a serious challenge to carry out political campaign at a local level where verbal pledges traditionally continue to dominate without presenting a specific election program in a written form and devoted to specific fields of concern.

In regard to voicing problems/themes related to the ethnic minorities in the pre-election process and how voters make decisions based on that, it is very important given the fact that ethnic Armenians constitute majority of the local population (absolute majority in Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki municipalities) and therefore policy initiatives, program visions, priorities and other relevant issues focused on social, economic and political integration of the ethnic minorities are very valuable for the local voters.

Given the trends identified in the process of political campaigning and based on existing facts we may conclude that candidates/political parties are less focused on specific concerns, problems and needs of the ethnic minority groups and therefore do not produce well-thought, structured and sustainable visions (policy issues, program initiatives, reformist visions, etc) to respond to the existing challenges.

Generally, aspects of ethnically sensitive political programming are of a verbal nature instead of being communicated in a documented form. The local Armenian-speaking community agrees in general that political parties almost do not have systemic vision on solution of specific needs of the minorities and therefore lack specific policy initiatives and reformist proposals in this respect. The only exception are local politicians from the Armenian-speaking community who are informed about specific concerns and needs of the local community.

The general idea of the local Armenian-speaking community about this issue is as follows: “They do not even present political programs while meeting the population leaving aside visions how to respond to the problems of the minorities.”

Unfortunately, practice of the local population’s participation in local political and electoral processes as well as in decision-making process together with the inadequate interest they take in processes in general, continues to pose a serious challenge.

Talks about politics in the local Armenian-speaking community is a general matter of discussion but when it comes to result-oriented and topic-based purposeful actions, we see visible passivity from the population which indicates low level of political, electoral and civic culture development. The local Armenian-speaking community representatives never participate in discussion about budget and municipality’s program priorities, barring some rare exceptions. There is an extreme lack of subject-matter discussion between elected representatives and population both during the pre-election and post-election periods which clearly indicates absence of common ground between the voters and those who get elected. In these circumstances it is impossible to ensure desirable degree of political accountability vis-à-vis the voters.

Among the positive trends are high level of recognizability of majoritarian MP among the local Armenian-speaking community which in turn contributes to making an informed choice.

According to the local Armenian-speaking community representatives, election environment for the ethnic minorities during 2020-2021 elections resembled to the election environment for ethnic Georgian voters. In regard to their assessment of 2020 parliamentary elections as compared to 2016 parliamentary elections which also applied to 2021 local

self-government elections, it was claimed that these elections had a certain challenge in terms of imperfect political campaigning owing to the problems sparked by the coronavirus pandemic and lack of political competition at a local level. Of additional note is that despite technically well-organized election process, insufficient level of competence among precinct election commission members still remains a challenge.

When it comes to providing information to the local Armenian-speaking community vis-à-vis political and electoral processes, traditionally serious and unsolved problem - scarcity of political and electoral information in the languages of the ethnic minorities – still persists.

This problem is particularly acute in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda municipalities where most of people cannot speak Georgian. In these two municipalities the most viewed TV channels are Armenian and Russian networks which in turn limits possibility for local Armenian-speaking community to get information about ongoing processes in Georgia, including political and electoral processes. As a result, Armenian-speaking population's possibility to make informed and knowledgeable choice at the elections, is significantly undermined.

There is a more promising situation in Akhaltsikhe municipality where knowledge of Georgian is relatively high among Armenian-speaking community and ethnic minorities living there can get information from Georgian news outlets.

Therefore, since Georgian information outlets are rarely used due to language barrier, face-to-face meetings between candidates and local populations in the pre-election period becomes critical to make sure that population is better informed about political process and political subjects in general on the one hand and to facilitate informed and knowledgeable choice of the voters on the other hand.

In terms of the Armenian-speaking community's information provision a promising factor here is rising figure of internet (social media) users among the local population, particularly among youth. This is an additional source of information for them and importance of this source grows daily. This is definitely a positive trend in terms of informed electoral participation.

Given all the abovementioned, participants of the focus groups opine that for proper realization of political and electoral rights of the ethnic Armenian voters, a number of systemic (instead of one-off) measures need to be taken which would be focused on improvement of qualifications of election commission members as well as raising political, electoral and civic culture of the local Armenian-speaking community. These measures should also include in-depth perceptibility of the ethnic minority groups' issues and preparation specific visions of solution among the candidates and political parties as well as facilitation of highly moral political campaigning in observance of ethical standards.

On top of that, in order to achieve high electoral participation among the ethnic minorities as well as enhance trust of the local community vis-à-vis political process in general it is vital to contribute higher representation and participation of the ethnic Armenians in party politics. The focus groups clearly demonstrated a positive correlation between public attitudes vis-à-vis electoral processes and representation of large numbers of ethnic Armenian individuals in party lists.

Marneuli, Gardabani, Bolnisi – Kvemo Kartli Region

Participation in Elections

Local ethnic Azerbaijani population is not characterized with stable electoral participation. They largely take part in elections if certain pre-conditions exist. For instance, this could be participation of a candidate which is acceptable for them or any other incentive.

General Factors Stipulating (Facilitating) Electoral Participation and Voting

According to the focus group participants, one of the factors stipulating electoral participation voting among the local ethnic Azerbaijani voter is a general perception that involvement in the electoral process is their right and obligation. In addition, desire to take part in election process is to a certain extent stipulated by the interest of voters to support that candidate/party which they trust and like.

Of note is that voting pattern of the voters is seriously affected by circumstances such as plea from family members and friends as well as urging from leaders of ethnic Azerbaijani community, direct or indirect pressure from political parties and their representatives and desire to keep or remove ruling party political party/politicians from power.

Unfortunately, across compact settlements of ethnic Azerbaijani community living in Kvemo Kartli region the widespread incentive to vote is to obtain certain reward (including financial reward) which obviously harms election environment in general and prospects of emergence and further progress of a consolidated democracy at the local level. Taking financial and other rewards in exchange of the vote has transformed into some kind of a “lucrative business” at a local level.

General Factors Stipulating Refusal (Not Facilitating) of Electoral Participation

In regard to refusal to participate in election, some of the ethnic Azerbaijani voters believe that electoral participation will change nothing since elections in Georgia are rigged.

One of the factors triggering indifference vis-à-vis the electoral process is absence of a desirable political party / candidate for the voters which would express their interests and therefore could get their support. This is a clear manifestation of rising demand among local public for appearance of new political actors as well as desire to make choice among multiple options. This is particularly true given the fact that quite considerable part of population does not trust local politicians.

Language barrier still remains one of the challenges in terms of informed participation of the ethnic minorities in the elections, although some political parties and candidates carry out campaign in languages spoken by the minorities and therefore ensure that campaign materials are distributed in Azerbaijani and Armenian languages.

During process of realization of focus groups, a regrettable trend has been identified. In particular, there is a rising influence of a radical Islamist group at a local level which for-

bids ethnic Azerbaijani voters to take part in the elections. It is noteworthy that activities of the abovementioned group became particularly visible in the run-up of 2020 parliamentary elections. However, with respect to 2021 local self-government elections, involvement of that group was not observed.

In regard to taking interest in elections in general, for the local ethnic Azerbaijani voters both parliamentary and local self-government elections are equally important. Despite the abovementioned, participants of the focus group came to an idea that local voters may have stronger interest in local self-government elections, since level of communication and mutual involvement of both voters and candidates are higher (candidates are mostly representatives of the local community and are therefore more recognizable). In addition, it is public perceptibility that local self-government bodies possess functional mandate to respond to local problems and challenges and therefore city hall and municipality council are capable to alleviate community concerns. Consequently, local self-government elections are considered as an important instrument to deal with local problems and participation there is somehow important.

Advantages of Electoral Participation

When electing a **specific political party** into Georgia's national legislative organ or municipality council, an ethnic Azerbaijani voter is guided by the following motivating factors: political party's program, pre-election town halls, personal factors of political party leadership at national and local levels, family decision, personal connections, political party's degree of awareness of local population's problems, advice from the community leader, approach of a political party vis-à-vis the ethnic minority issues and representation of relevant ethnic minority people in political party structures as well as in party lists.

In regard to election of a specific **politician**, for instance as an MP, mayor of municipality council member, a local ethnic Azerbaijani voter pays attention to such circumstances as politician's personal qualities and ethnic origins, candidate's election program as well as political party and national/local leaders whom he/she represents, pre-election town halls, family, decision, personal connections, candidate's degree of awareness of local population's problems, advice from the community or spiritual leader and candidate's local team.

In the process of realization of focus group, a very interesting and at the same time thought-provoking trend which concerns ethnic Azerbaijani community, has been identified. Traditionally, ethnic Azerbaijani community, demonstrated high level of support for the ruling political party through many years. Nevertheless, this traditional support for the ruling party somehow deviated for 2016 and 2020 parliamentary elections and consequently, interest in the opposition political parties and candidates has surged. The same trend remained unaltered for the 2021 local self-government elections.

This explains existence of a certain category of voters in the local community which would participate in elections only because to see the ruling political elite defeated and to this aim would vote even unfavorable for them political party/politician.

As clarified by the focus group participants, dwindling interest vis-à-vis the ruling political party among local voters is attributable to a number of factors, including institutional strength and robust engagement of the United National Movement in Kvemo Kartli region, positive attitudes vis-à-vis the United National Movement leader (Mikheil Saakashvili) among local community as well as certain skepticism towards the ruling political party among local public which is largely stipulated by nepotism, corruption, injustice and lack of meritocracy in the public administration process.

In regard to ethnic element in shaping political preferences, the focus group participants explained that support of the ethnic Azerbaijani candidate at a local level is an important factor, not least because of easier communication given the existing language barrier. However, despite the abovementioned, only ethnic origin is not the sole factor to shape voting choice. The focus group participants clarify that together with ethnic element, candidate's qualities including reputation, experience and public trust are also important.

Of additional note is that there is no particular problem at a local level that would hinder voting for an ethnic Georgian candidate if needed, including for mayor, if that Georgian candidate was well-suited to satisfy electoral needs of local communities.

Supporting women candidates is not a serious challenge for the local voters. However, there is a trend that as opposed to youth which are more liberal partly because obviously better access to information and education resources, elderly segment of the local population gives advantage to the male candidates.

Electoral Behavior: 2020 Parliamentary Elections and 2021 Local Self-Government Elections

The focus group participants opine that 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections can be assessed as free, despite identification of several shortcomings for 2020 elections, particularly with respect to the election administration's work. In addition, it was stated that participation of local voters in elections was particularly important, since there was desire to change the ruling political elite. This trend continued for 2021 local self-government elections too.

Of additional note is that according to the focus group participants, in contrast with 2021 local self-government elections, 2020 parliamentary elections were conducted in light of serious challenges. This is attributable to a more complicated internal political discourse caused by conflict in Karabakh as well as imperfect political campaign owing to the problems sparked by the coronavirus pandemic.

In regard to population's interest and proactive involvement in the election lists, of note is that most of the ethnic Azerbaijani population did not verify themselves in voter lists prior the Election Day. Moreover, big majority of the population was not even informed about such possibility, especially in rural areas.

Electoral Participation and Non-Participation of the Local Ethnic Azerbaijani Community:

According to the focus group participants, for those voters **who participated in the elections**, desire to vote was attributable to a number of factors: presence of acceptable candidate/political party and desire to elect them, plea from a family member, friend, community and spiritual leader, desire to gain some reward, pressure by political party/party representative and agitators (largely hinting support of the ruling political party from employees of the public sector).

In regard to voters who did not take part in elections this was attributable to several reasons. In particular, there is still nihilism vis-à-vis elections and political processes at a local level and therefore lack of interest to get involved. This is mostly stipulated by negative expectations among the public about inevitable falsification of elections. Apart from that we see a lack of faith in local politicians across the region.

It is noteworthy that one of the factors that hinders electoral participation at a local level is a limited access to information about all political parties and politicians which in turn deprives ethnic Azerbaijani voter to make a choice from multiple options because their political knowledge is confined by information about the Georgian Dream and United National Movement alone. In regard to other political parties, information about them is hard to access mostly because of their political passivity and scarcity of relevant electoral/agitation materials.

An interesting trend has been identified with respect to **voting / not voting for majoritarian candidates**. Some of the local voters who voted for a specific majoritarian candidate made their choice based on such circumstances as candidate's personal qualities, ethnic origins, candidate's political program (which mostly consisted of verbal pledges), political party which candidate represented, pre-election town halls, leadership (both at national and local levels) of the political party which candidate represented, family decisions, personal familiarity, candidate's degree of awareness of problems of local population, advise/plea from the community and spiritual leaders as well as composition and reputation of candidate's local team.

In regard to **election of a political party** it was stipulated by the following factors: political party ideology and program, pre-election town halls, reputation of political party leadership at local and national levels, family decision, personal familiarity, political party's degree of awareness of problems of local population, decision of the community and spiritual leaders, political party's team, approach of a political party vis-à-vis ethnic minority issues and qualitative (instead of quantitative) representation of a specific ethnic minority people in the ranks of a political party.

According to the general assessment, the local ethnic Azerbaijani community was more or less aware of information about all candidates/political parties taking part in the elec-

tions. However, local voters were mostly informed about activities and candidates of the ruling party and United National Movement.

In regard to political parties' programs, research demonstrated that the local population is less informed about programs of candidates/political parties. Lack of communication between electoral subjects and local voters still remains a challenge in Kvemo Kartli region. During the pre-election town halls only verbal messages were voiced instead of explanation and clarification of major pillars of a political program in a documented form.

It was clearly identified during the pre-election process that candidates / political parties were less focused on specific concerns, problems and needs of ethnic Azerbaijani voters which are more relevant for their full-fledged civic, political and economic integration. Therefore, during the pre-election meetings, emphasis was made on finding solutions for local social problems facing the community instead of presenting sustainable and long-term program that would support integration.

In Kvemo Kartli region, the issue of electoral participation of the ethnic Azerbaijani population in local political and decision-making process still remains a challenge. This clearly indicate their poor civic and political participation culture.

Unfortunately, Azerbaijani-speaking population's lack of access to news outlets because of lack of knowledge of Georgian language still poses an insurmountable challenge. Therefore, principal means of information for local population are news broadcasts in Azerbaijani, Turkish and Russian languages. As a result, local population is detached from the Georgian information environment which further worsens the prospects of their knowledgeable participation in the electoral process.

Given all the abovementioned, the focus group participants believe that to ensure full-fledged participation of the ethnic Azerbaijani voters in the political and electoral processes as well as proper realization of their electoral rights, valuable effort should be invested in the following directions:

- Improvement of activities of the election administration;
- Raising civic and political awareness level among the local Azerbaijani-speaking population;
- Supplying Azerbaijani-speaking population with political and election materials printed in language they speak;
- Political spectrum should properly understand and reflect real problems and concerns which the local ethnic Azerbaijani community faces and start finding respective solutions;
- In-depth analysis of influence of radical Islamist groups (subculture) and prevention of those factors that contribute expansion of this influence
- Realization of additional public and civic programs for capacity development of the ethnic Azerbaijani youth to reduce influence of radical Islamist groups over them.