



Second Interim Report on Pre-Election Monitoring in the Regions with Compact Settlement of Ethnic Minorities

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Introduction

The present report reflects upon the current pre-electoral trends and developments underway in the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. The report has been drafted within the framework of the program carried out by the Public Movement “Multinational Georgia” for monitoring of the local self-government elections scheduled to be held on 30 May.

The monitoring program is being carried out in the regions of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti where the ethnic minorities are resided in compact settlements. The report on monitoring covers the period of time between 5 May and 20 May 2010.

The report has been primarily focused on highlighting the findings obtained by the project deployed observers (LTOs) regarding the following issues: monitoring the use of administrative resources; provision of the equal conditions for the all political entities participating in the elections; the evaluation of the pre-election environment developed in the region and the identification of any facts of pressure and intimidation imposed on the political opposition, work of the local election administration and activities of the local means of mass media.

Preparing the given report LTOs of the PMMG have conducted survey of the political parties’ representatives.

Executive Summary

Since the issue of the first pre-election report situation in the regions of the observation is being gradually changed. With the approaching of the Elections Day environment in the target regions becomes sharper and more facts of the pressure on some political subjects or mutual contradictions between them can be discovered. However pre-election environment is better than in year 2008. Particular case is Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts where situation is quite tensed.

In general we can say that political parties are not very active in the target regions. The following parties are represented in the target regions (appointment of the candidates and campaigning):

“United National Movement”; “Alliance for Georgia”; “Topadze – Entrepreneurs”; “Tortladze – Democratic Party”; “Targamadze, Grigolia, Christian – Democratic Movement”; “National Council”.

According to the regional representatives of the political parties the main resources of their political forces are allocated in the campaigning in the capital and self-governing cities, while regional representations of the parties have deficit of the both human and financial resources, some of them are not able to prepare

posters and some of them are not able to hire observers. All mentioned above creates deficit of the political competitiveness.

Level of the electoral awareness of the population is drastically low, in course of the awareness raising campaign representatives of the PMMG discovered that many persons in the regions do not know which type of the elections will take place, some of the local residents do not understand nature of the local self-government and its structure. LTOs of PMMG in Kvemo-Kartli prognose low rates of the voters' turnout.

Cooperation between political parties and electoral administration as well as work of the electoral administration in general is quite good, however there are some miscommunication between parties and CEC with regard to the making corrections to the voters lists.

Bellow we draw you kind attention to the detailed description of the pre-electoral trends.

Main Findings

Samtskhe-Javakheti region

At the moment ruling party “United National Movement” is the dominant political force with regard to campaigning with the appropriate financial resources as well as administrative interference in the pre-election process.

The evaluation of the comments submitted by the major political entities engaged in the region has clearly demonstrated the fact that the opposition political parties lack the financial resources as well as human capital to actively engage in the regions and carry out pre-election campaigns and capture the wider spectra of the voters. As a result the local voters are not adequately informed about the goals and objectives of the opposition political parties and consequently do not have enough understanding of the political programs and concepts the political entities should offer to the voters.

For the moment only “United National Movement “ is carrying out pre-election campaign in the languages comprehensible to minority groups (Azerbaijani and Armenian languages) – the agitation materials including posters as well as political PSA are being translated and disseminated in minority languages. As for the opposition political parties due to the financial problems they are not able carry out the similar activities.

As the “Conservative Party of Georgia” representative in Samtskhe-Javakheti region Oleg Sandroshvili explained the political subjects formally enjoy the equal opportunities to carry out the pre-election campaign. However, taking into consideration the immense financial as well as administrative resources possessed by the ruling party “United National Movement” it appears that the governmental party is posed in an advanced conditions.

The opposition party claims the shortage of financial resources to be utilized for the conduction of pre-election campaign. The party which is the member of the block “National Council” has not yet received the printed products from the central office and therefore is not able not only to disseminate them during the face to face meetings with the supporters but also to place the posters on visual stands.

According to the comments made by the party representative there are no serious facts of pressure and intimidation imposed on the party activists in Akhaltsikhe, Borjomi, Adigeni and Aspindza. However, the reality to this end is different in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts where the representatives of “Movement – For Fair Georgia” are organizing the pre-election activities of “National Council”.

As Armen Farmanian, the coordinator of the election staff of the “Movement – For Fair Georgia” in Akhalkalaki district has pointed out political entities are not put in the equal conditions in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts. There are facts of the intimidation against political activists. More precisely, as he explained Levon Kobelian, the majoritarian candidate of the “Movement – For Fair Georgia” in Ninotsminda district has been strongly advised to withdraw his candidature otherwise his family members and relatives would face the serious problems. Mr. Kobelian was forced to withdraw from candidacy.

Moreover, according to Mr. Farmanian the Movement’s supporters are being threatened by the local police as well as the representatives of the “United National Movement” to avoid cooperation with the Movement. In addition, all the agitation materials posted in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts belonging to the Movement are being forcibly removed presumably by the activists of the ruling party.

As Mr. Farmanian pointed out the local shop keepers are intimidated and oppressed by the representatives of the local authorities who do not allow them to post the posters on the shop windows belonging to the “Movement – For Fair Georgia”. As the shop keepers complain they will be seriously penalized if they permit the posting of the opposition parties’ agitation materials in their respective premises.

Moreover, as the representative of the Movement has explained the local voters’ lists are incomplete and largely falsified (many dead persons, people living abroad etc. are still included in the list) and many local farmers are traditionally moved out for farming. However representatives of the political force failed to communicate these short-comings with the electoral administration.

While regional representation of the “Conservative Party of Georgia” in conjunction with their colleagues from “National Council” have carried out the

monitoring on the voters list and submitted the changes and corrections to the CEC. As far as the deadline for making correction in the voters list has passed only on 16 May the representatives of the party are not able to check whether their initiatives are taken into account by the appropriate body – CEC.

According to the information obtained from the Head of Akhaltsikhe branch of “Alliance for Georgia” Tamar Gogoladze some facts of intimidation on the political activists of the Alliance as well as abuse of the administrative resources on the part of the ruling party “United National Movement” can be identified in the region. As Mr. Gogoladze complained the Alliance is not put in equal conditions as compared with the ruling party which enjoys the financial and administrative superiority against other political entities.

As become known the practice of illegally removing the visual agitation posters belonging to different opposition political entities and to some extent ruling political party has been widely used in the region. Most of the posters belonging to “Alliance for Georgia” have been forcibly removed in Akhaltsikhe and in some other parts of the region.

In addition, it has to be noted that the windows of most of the trading objects host the posters of ruling party “United National Movement” while the agitation printed products belonging to other political entities are being left without placement. As the local representatives of the opposition political parties including the “Alliance for Georgia” complain the owners of the local trading objects refuse the opposition parties request to place their posters inside the windows. Therefore, as the political parties argue the owners of the shops are imposed under the pressure presumable from the side of the local administration not to cooperate with opposition political parties.

Moreover, as the election law stipulates the local administration should ensure the equal access of all political subject to post their agitation materials. However, according to the explanation obtained from the representative of the “Alliance for Georgia” the local authorities are not able (willing) to appropriate the equal space for that purpose – they complain that agitation stands belong to private entities and it is in their immediate discretion to make a decision on the appropriate of the space; consequently the local administration cannot interfere in private business. As it became known there are 3 billboards in Akhaltsikhe and 2 of them are already occupied by the “United National Movement”.

The local representative of the “Alliance for Georgia” has protested the fact of intimidation imposed on its political activists. On 9 May a sheep has been disappeared in Village “Muskhi” who was found after a couple of days. However, the 3 activists of “Alliance for Georgia” had been taken to the local police station without any evidence and interrogated for more than 10 hours. Interestingly, two suspects (Giorgi Zhuzhunadze, Spartak Melikidze) interrogate by the police were the party candidates in Uravli 13 election district and the one (Giorgi Inasaridze) the actual member of Uravli 13 election commission nominated by “Alliance for Georgia”. All the detainees have been released 10 hours after an intensive and offensive interrogation.

“Alliance for Georgia” actively participated in monitoring over the correction of the voters list and made their suggestions to the election administration. So far the party suggestions have been taken into consideration for Atskuri voters list. The amendments made to the voters list for Ajara have not been accepted by the elections administration. The political entity is continuing the procedures to identify whether their amendments and suggestions have been shared by the election administration regarding the voters list for the remaining districts of the region. In general as the representative of the “Alliance for Georgia” noted the relationship between the party and the local election administration is quite constructive and that the administration in most cases is responsive to the needs and requirements of the political party.

The representative of the “United National Movement” (Executive Secretary of the “United National Movement” in Akhaltsikhe) Marina Sudadze has explained that the political environment in the region is quite calm and cannot be characterized with the violence or the facts of pressure and intimidation imposed on the opposition political entities. According to her comments the ruling party does not apply to any illegal or offensive methods against its political rivals. Moreover, as she pointed out the ruling party is not in exposed to the favorable conditions as compared to its opponents.

The representative of the ruling party has underlined the fact that the political opponents are in fact quite passive in the conduction of the pre-election process including the meeting with the local voters as well as dissemination of the agitation materials. To her belief this is because of financial shortage of the available resource as well as the inadequacy of the human resources to be utilized for electoral purposes.

There are only two established offices “Alliance for Georgia” and “Conservative Party of Georgia” which are traditionally engaged in the regions. As for the rest of the political entities they are just in the process to get involved in the campaign.

Finally, talking about the lower activity of the opposition political entities in the region one trend has to be addressed. According to the initiative put forward by the opposition in 2010 the changes have been made to the Elections Code. In line with the changes for the first time the members of the precinct election commissions appointed by the opposition political parties are allowed to elect the secretary of the commission among the opposition parties.

As has been discovered the opposition parties operating in Borjomi have refused to appoint the secretaries of the election commission for different reasons. Only three candidates have been nominated by “Topadze – Industrialists” and “Giorgi Targamadze, Inga Grigolia –Christian Democratic Union”; the rest 24 secretaries of the precinct election commission have been nominated by the political party “We Ourselves”. Moreover, it has to be noted that the secretaries of the election commission have the wider array of responsibilities including the dissemination of public information and making decisions on some very important electoral issues. Therefore, the secretary assumes the very important function in the election administration and is having the sway on the fair conduction of the elections.

Interestingly, Beso Popkhadze, the head of Borjomi district organization of “Topadze – Industrialists” has pointed out that the opposition parties turned out to be unprepared to realize their initiative that is to assume the functions of the secretary of the election commission. According to him the opposition parties do not have enough competent and educated members to nominate as the secretaries.

Kvemo Kartli region

As the leaders of the opposition parties declare, the local residents have no idea who they are voting for. Some believe that it is the presidential and parliamentary elections other suppose that the local population should elect the Mayor of Tbilisi. Ironically, according to the resent survey carried out by PMMG in the region only one person out of ten had the correct answer to the question “what type of elections is being held in the region. This is partly because of the significant decrease in the sum appropriated by the donor organizations to finance voters’ educational programs in the region.

The only TV Company operating in Marneuli terminated translation of programs in Azerbaijani language due to the emerged financial problems. It has to be mentioned that only the ruling party “United National Movement” translated election program in Azerbaijani language. According to the local leader of the “Alliance for Georgia” and its candidate in Bolnisi election district David Aslanidze party does not have any problems in highlighting the activities in local TV (TV Company Channel 5) carried out by the “Alliance for Georgia”. The TV company is running the election PSA of the alliance in Georgian language.

As the representatives of “Christian-Democrats” and “Alliance for Georgia” claim Central Election Commission is ultimately responsible in informing the local population and therefore should ensure the comprehensive coverage of election related issues in minority language. Central Election Commission started broadcasting of informational clips in Georgian and Azerbaijani languages in local Marneuli television from May 1st. Informational programs are being broadcasted by television only in Georgian language.

As for the informational meetings with the local voters Marneuli District Election Commission prefers to hang election materials on visual desks and serve the local votes only at the office. Unfortunately, the DEC do not hold any informational meetings with the voters in and out of the town.

As for Tsalka district there are some problems related to the voters’ lists, namely in Nardevan village number of the voters in the lists increased from 650 (parliamentary elections) to 940, which is not corresponding to the number of the population. Precinct election commission is closed and voters’ lists are hanged on the shop window of the local shop belonging to Samson Tamarian, who is also local majoritarian candidate of the “United National Movement”.

Interestingly, the party representatives complain that the parties do not have enough financial resources to print the agitation posters. Therefore, all the majoritarian candidates in the regions are being left without publicity through posting the visual materials.

Out of six parties only one- “United National Movement”, presented the party program in ethnic minorities’ language – Azerbaijani language. The rest claims that because of the shortage of financial resources they cannot afford the translation of political programs and concepts into Azerbaijani language. “Tortladze – Democratic Party”; “Christian-Democrats”; “Topadze – Industrialists”; and “National Council” do not even intend to draft programs in Azerbaijani language.

With the approaching the elections day the opposition parties became more active in Kvemo Kartli region. New offices were opened in Rustavi and other parts of the region.

Members and activists of regional offices talk about pre-electoral disturbing factors and pressure. Representative of the “Alliance for Georgia” for Bolnisi district has pointed the fact of intimidation imposed on the party political activist. Temur Rekhviashvili, the member of the election commission of Village Poladauri appointed by the “Alliance for Georgia” has been threatened by Besik Rekhviashvili, the candidate of “United National Movement” in Rachisubani Election District to halt any closer cooperation with the “Alliance for Georgia” otherwise he would face serious problems. As a result of this Temur Rekhviashvili has resigned and is now unemployed. As Mr. Aslanidze complained the abovementioned fact is the clear manifestation of intimidation imposed on the political activist from the side of the ruling party. Moreover, as the party representative complained all the state servants in Bolnisi district are strongly advised to vote for the “United National Movement”.

The opposition talks about pre-electoral pressure and activities obstacles in Kvemo Kartli and in the whole Georgia as well. Though there still are some differences in opinions. As the representatives of the “Party of Future” Rustavi organization claim, no one interferes in their pre-election campaign and they are able to work in stable environment.

The critical approach towards the issue of intimidation and the pressure imposed on the opposition political entities is being kept by the “Movement for Fair Georgia” Rustavi organization. According to the assertion of the party representatives the party coordinator in the Gardabani municipality was pressed by the government officials. Valerian Beridze was threatened by strange persons and was advised to leave the party. Mr Beridze presumes that threatening was organized by Gangebeli. Currently we check on the mentioned facts. The person threatening the party representative was presumably the Gangebeli of local municipality. As the “Movement for Fair Georgia” representatives claim every person showing his interest to cooperate with the party is threatened. They even address one’s mother, father and other family members. Head of the Rustavi branch of the movement Ivane Shatirishvili claims that the county is terrorized and elections will not be conducted in objective environment.

Khaik Meltonian majoritarian candidate of the “Alliance for Georgia” in village Nardevan of the Tsalka district states that there was attempt of the illegal detention of his brother Marlen Meltonian. According to Khaik Meltonian his brother was released after attempt to charge him with the criminal offence. He cannot draw direct connection between detention of his brother without any reason and his political activities, but he suspects that it can be indirect intimidation.

Basing on all the facts and trends mentioned in the report we call kind attention of the domestic and international observing organizations to put significant attention on the situation in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli regions on the Elections Day.