

**RESEARCH REPORT
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The Politics of the 2002 Census in Georgia/Georgian Municipal Elections, June 2002

The initial purpose of the trip was to obtain the results of the first post-Soviet census in Georgia, which was conducted in February 2002. I interviewed several scholars who will be analyzing the results. They too are awaiting data: the processing of the census results has been repeatedly delayed, and, at last report, they will be released no earlier than September or October 2002. A number of hypotheses were advanced to explain the delay. One was based on the authorities' fears that the population figures would lead to major political scandals in advance of local elections that were held in early June—particularly concerning the number of potential voters in each district and vote fraud that is based on false entries in voter lists.

A more plausible explanation is that the census was very poorly organized—despite the fact that it received substantial financial backing from major international donors. Experts familiar with the preparations for the census argued that many of the returns were improperly filled out by poorly trained, unsupervised, inadequately compensated, and in some cases barely literate census workers. As a result, inputting the data into computers has been a very time-consuming process. Of course, another consequence of the poor preparatory work is that the data themselves are corrupted and will have a large margin of error. On the other hand, the census will provide a unique and massive sample, on a national scale, of the social and economic consequences of Georgia's transition. Particularly important will be data on regional changes in population numbers since the 1989 census and changes in the social-demographic composition of Georgia that have resulted from independence and the transition to a market economy.

Given the problems with the census results—which I arranged to be sent to me when available—I spent most of the grant period studying the municipal elections that were held, on very short notice, across Georgia in early and mid-June 2002. Elections and political change in Georgia are topics that I have followed closely since 1990. Drawing on past contacts, I interviewed a range of academic analysts, political party leaders, the deputy chairman of the Central Election Commission, and independent election observers.

These were Georgia's second municipal elections, the first having been held in 1998. The main purpose of the elections was to choose new municipal and local legislative bodies (*sakrebulebi* in Georgian). A new feature of the elections was the first popular elections of mayors in a number of cities; excluded from this process were Tbilisi and the port city of Poti, in both of which heads of administration are still designated by Shevardnadze. In Tbilisi a new city council of 49 members was elected, and it was chosen entirely by proportional voting by party list. In other cities voters were presented with a long list of candidates and were asked to vote for up to as many candidates as there were places in the council (one large multimandate district).

An important aspect of the elections in Tbilisi was their role as a kind of "primary" for parliamentary elections that are to be held in the fall of 2003. Parties that intend to participate in the 2003 elections fielded party lists that included at the top all leading members of their parties—though few actually intended to serve in the local council if their party passed the threshold necessary for representation in the council. The level of uncertainty about the outcome of the elections was high because of the break-up of the "party of power," the Citizens'

Union and Shevardnadze's own decline in personal popularity (according to the Constitution he cannot be elected again when his current term expires in 2005). The Tbilisi elections resulted in a victory by two of the leading parties in opposition to Shevardnadze, the National Front headed by Mikhail Saakashvili and the Labor Party. Saakashvili, a lawyer trained in the US, has a reputation as the most pro-Western of Georgia's politics. The Labor Party, led by Shalva Natelashvili, is a low-profile populist party with a socialist program. The remnants of the Civic Union failed to elect a single deputy. As a result of an agreement between the two winning parties, Saakashvili agreed to leave his seat in parliament in order to serve as chairman of the city council (a possible stepping stone to the Georgian presidency).

In comparison with previous elections, the common consensus among Georgian analysts was that these elections were more poorly organized than any since 1990. Numerous problems emerged, especially in Tbilisi. Giorgi Zesashvili of the Central Election Commission placed the blame on the Georgian parliament which followed its traditional practice of changing the election law just prior to new elections. This did not permit adequate time for training of poll workers and election commission officials, many of whom were new to the job. It also created problems in compiling voter lists and printing/distributing ballots.

At the same time, the elections were widely seen as less corrupt than any held since 1992. This is attributed to the fact that the party of power split prior to the elections, and as a result there was no clear beneficiary of the "administrative resources" that have been the main instrument for vote fraud in Georgia. The poor showing of the remnants of the Civic Union was the clearest evidence that fraud was not significant, at least in Tbilisi. (One common scheme used in the past is the "carousel" –in which a minibus of voters using fraudulent identification cards go from precinct to precinct and vote using the "supplemental list" provision that allows voters not on the roster to cast their ballots simply by producing identification. These lists are almost never cross-checked to catch cheating.) Georgian identity cards are held by a relatively small percentage of the population, especially outside Tbilisi. Instead, voters were given a voter identity document with no photograph and no protection against forgery or duplication. In Georgian regions, the administrative resource was used more effectively by local political leaders. The most extreme case, as usual, was in the republic of Ajaria where the local leader, Aslan Abashidze, arranged for his son to be elected mayor of Batumi.