

# The 'Titanic' remains afloat after elections in Georgia

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A spell of chilly autumn weather has somewhat cooled down emotions and passions, and sudden gusts continue to rip down innumerable posters and appeals, the inalienable attributes of fierce pre-election engagements—this time for seats in the Georgian Parliament. The outcome of the Oct. 31 elections shocked the overwhelming majority of contenders: Only 3 out of 33 political parties and associations were able to surmount the barrier to enter Parliament, which was recently raised from 5% of the vote, to 7%.

As was anticipated, the party to finish in first place with a significant lead, was the Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), the ruling party of Georgia's President, Eduard Shevardnadze, with 118 seats. It was followed by the most serious contestant, the political alliance Georgia's Revival (GR), headed by the leader of the Adjara Autonomous Republic, A. Abashidze, with 58 seats. And in third place, a party with a rather pretentious name, "Industry Will Save Georgia," captured 14 seats.

The latter was founded recently by a successful businessman, a producer of Georgian beer, Gogi Topadze, a promoter of a self-sustainable national economy and one of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) adversaries in Georgia.

Remaining seats in the 235-member unicameral parliament have been occupied by the "independents."

The rest of the political parties, notably, one enjoying a certain popularity, the Labor Party (LP), chaired by Shalva Natelashvili [for an interview with Natelashvili, see *EIR*, Oct. 29, 1999], and another, the somewhat older and conspicuous National Democratic Party (NDP), led by Irina Sarishvili-Chanturia, were left outside the legislative body. In the case of the NDP, it fell victim to its own initiative to raise the barrier for entry into the Parliament.

Unlike most of the former Soviet and eastern European states, to say nothing of the advanced Western democracies, one cannot speak of the existence of more or less organized

progressive political forces on the left of the political spectrum. With rare exceptions, such as probably the Labor Party, only right-wing political formations participated in the parliamentary elections. Confrontations would frequently flare up between the center-based CUG and the Adjara "Revivalists," without any principled divergences between their political and ideological platforms emerging. Ruthless struggle between them was aimed merely at achieving political influence and power.

## NATO and regional conflicts

For the last few years, the pro-government CUG, which initially had a social-democratic coloring, moved, bit by bit, to the right, acquiring dynamism and all necessary levers and mechanisms of power indispensable for the campaign. The President personally participated in the election marathon, touring around the country and meeting with the electorate. In a number of locations, he referred to grandiose achievements and brilliant perspectives of the nation for the new millennium. Emphasis was placed on unquestionable advances in international affairs—the recent accession of the country to the Council of Europe, the World Trade Organization, useful ties with the IMF, successful regional cooperation, strengthening of relations with NATO, and the prospect of integration into that alliance as early as 2005, linked with prospects for settling the Abkhazian conflict. Some observers, however, are cautious about NATO's involvement in the region, because it might set the great powers on a collision course here.

To confirm Georgia's clear-cut westward orientation, President Shevardnadze put particular stress on his special personal relations with U.S. President Bill Clinton, former U.S. President George Bush, former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and other prominent world political figures, the importance of which for the present and future of Georgia, in his words, is difficult to overestimate. He emphasized how very significant it is that we have a new Constitution, strengthening the principles of parliamentarianism and democracy.

As to the numerous internal issues, related in particular to the continuing Abkhazian and Ossetian problems, the President reiterated that they have always been the focus of the leadership's attention, but need more time and patience to be

unraveled. Meanwhile, about 300,000 internally displaced people from Abkhazia cannot return to their homes because of the continuing deadlock in negotiations.

### **Economic crisis not addressed**

However, the President was less specific in taking up a far larger number of questions which have been causing bitter discontent on the part of ordinary people for about ten years now, and which seem to have no end. These include, first of all, massive unemployment, especially among youth, which has forced hundreds of thousands of people to abandon the country, with most going to Russia in search of work to support their families. The situation may even grow worse, with the eventual introduction of a visa requirement between the two countries, in connection with the situation in Chechnya. Many were puzzled at the government's pledge to raise pensions and wages threefold by the year 2003, because even the current miserable allowances have not been paid for a long time.

The supply of electricity to households, which remained more or less stable during the election campaign, ceased as soon as preliminary election results became known, i.e., the day after the election.

While polemicizing with the main opposition official media, top office-holders kept blaming Adjar leaders for ignoring the decrees of the central authority, hard-line regionalism, tax evasion, close contacts with Russia, and other mortal sins, which certainly helped to create a negative, even frightening image of Adjara.

Despite that, the Georgia's Revival coalition, a motley mixture of parties ranging from the Socialists, on one side, and the heir apparents of the late nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia, on the other, was able to rally a sufficient number of supporters to form an impressive parliamentary caucus.

Other electoral participants' campaigning was hopelessly flabby and unconvincing. For example, a lot of the NDP's popularity is attributed to its chairwoman, the widow of NDP leader Georgi Chanturia, especially because of her ardent appearances in the Parliament. Some people tend to think of the NDP as a nationalistic party, because of its name; others regret that it has been deprived of parliamentary representatives.

The postulates of the Party of National Ideology, reeking of provincialism, dispensed with such universal conceptions as democracy, patriotism, or even a national idea.

Long before election day, some people confessed that they would rather vote for the ruling party for fear of an unknown future, an attitude in line with Hamlet's question "To be, or not to be":

. . . puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?

Another reason for the resounding victory of some, and dramatic setback for others, was the application, or lack thereof, of the newest election technologies and skills. Among them were circulation of dubious public opinion polls, engagement of various mobile groups to "monitor" the situation at the polling booths, and undisguised populism—e.g., rendering services and favors to the population, such as repairing sections of roads, providing electricity 24 hours per day, paying wages on time, and even travelling by public transport on the part of top officials, including President Shevardnadze.

### **Conditions deteriorate**

Meanwhile, against the background of certain international accomplishments, the situation within the country, particularly in the economy, social life, and so on, remains next to desperate.

According to the latest UN report, in 1998 Georgia ranked 108 in the world on the human development index, sliding down three points compared to the previous year; ten years ago, Georgia ranked 66.

Amid disorderly and hastily implemented privatization, financial speculation quickly divided the society into a tiny, super-wealthy group of owners who promptly adapted to the new surroundings of infinite liberalization, and a huge mass of pauperized have-nots. Initially, accumulated capital went into trade and banking bubbles, which multiplied the fortunes of the rich. All spheres of life became thoroughly commercialized.

Corporatist aims and the priorities of the elite, and the interests of the people at large, have come increasingly into conflict. Based on the number of gasoline stations, casinos, restaurants, small bazaars, and stalls and street vendors per capita, Georgia may well be able to claim a top place in the record books.

Simultaneously, in full conformity with the famous pedagogical device of Lyndon LaRouche, "The Triple Curve: A Typical Collapse Function," Georgian industry, notably machine building, power engineering, and housing construction, fell into decay; science has perished; and once-flourishing Georgian art hardly shows signs of life. In this environment, corruption, the legacy of the recent past, has enveloped all echelons of power and has become virtually ineradicable.

Like other former Soviet countries, Georgia became fertile soil for the financial manipulations of the International Monetary Fund, whose regular financial injections and conditionalities softly kill, rather than cure, the ailing economy.

The new Georgian Parliament is starting to function. But will it be able to cope with the great number of problems facing the country?

The *Titanic* remains afloat, although the captain, that is, the President, awaits a new trial: Presidential elections in April 2000.