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Georgia after the Local Elections: First Step towards Self-Governance

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On 15 June, Georgia held local elections under new rules. For the first time, mayors of cities and chairpersons of municipalities were elected directly. Local self-government reform has not yet addressed the crucial issue of a financial system for local authorities, but it is a step in the right direction. The success of Georgian self-government reform could establish a model for other Eastern Partnership countries, including Ukraine, which has just started activities in this area. The European Union and its Member States should support Georgia and other EaP countries in the process of decentralisation.

The overall winner of Sunday's local elections is the ruling coalition Georgian Dream (GD). This party's mayoral candidates received more than 50% in most local government units. The overall turnout was 43.31%, slightly lower than in the last election (2010—49%), which may be due primarily to the negative election campaign.

Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus, in which elections meet democratic standards. Progress in the implementation of electoral standards has been recorded in subsequent reports by observation missions carried out by the OSCE/ODIHR after the parliamentary election in 2012 and presidential election in 2013. The executive power is working with civil society organisations. Evidence of this was a memorandum that drew a clear line between the activities of political parties and those of the state, and to which seven NGOs, the Central Election Commission (CEC) and the government's Agency for the Free and Fair Elections were signatories. The purpose of the document is to prevent violations of election law by state officials.

The First Stage of the Reform of Local Government. In autumn 2012, one of GD's campaign issues was building local democracy. Support for local government reform was achieved both from within, on the part of Georgian NGOs, and through external donors. In March 2013, a government decree stating the main objectives of the reform was announced. The democratisation of the system of public management and greater participation of local communities in public life were indicated as the primary objectives of the planned changes. The legislative changes introduced in recent months began the first phase of reform, which in the long run aims to decentralise the Georgian political system. In February, parliament adopted a law on the reform of local government, and then in March new regulations were passed, concerning the electoral system (electoral thresholds, the number of members of local councils, mayors, and dismissal procedures for removing mayors).

At the current stage, the reform expands the number of cities with the status of local government, where residents elect the mayor directly, to 12. Previously, only residents of Tbilisi had the opportunity to elect the mayor of the city directly. Moreover, now the Georgians could choose, in addition to the members of local councils (as it was before) the chairpersons of 59 municipalities (outside the 12 major cities). This phase of reforms focused on preparation to carry out the local elections in accordance with the new regulations, but did not consider delegation of duties and financial powers to the local government. These are essential elements of the system leading to real decentralisation. These regulations are to be introduced by the end of this year, as part of another block of changes regulating duties and powers of local governments. Continuation of the decentralisation policies will be a test of GD's genuine reformist intentions. In the coalition, there are both supporters of the far-reaching decentralisation of the state, as well as more conservative politicians, wary of too radical reforms.

The Brutal Campaign and the Lack of Dialogue. The local elections were yet another scene of acute political conflict between the incumbent Georgian Dream coalition and the opposition United National Movement (UNM), which ruled until 2012. The opposition blamed the authorities for the intimidation of its candidates (leading to the resignation of many of them from participating in the elections), an increase in political violence, including the beating of two UNM politicians, and the exclusion of UNM candidates by the CEC.

There were loud protests about the annulment of the UNM candidacy for the post of head of the Marneuli municipality. The CEC initially concluded that the candidate did not meet the requirement of having been resident in Georgia for a period of two years. Contesting this decision, the opposition stormed the building of the electoral commission and tried to force its members to change the decision. Ultimately, however, the conflict was resolved by a court, which recognised the right of the UNM candidate to take part in the elections.

In the unanimous assessment of external observers, the functioning of the electoral commission has improved compared to previous elections. However, the level of violence in the election campaign has increased. The candidates focused on personal accusations instead of substantive arguments. As a result, the ruling GD coalition consolidated its power in local administration. None of the United National Movement candidates won mayoral elections, coming only second or third. In some cities and municipalities the representatives of the United Opposition, led by Nino Burjanadze is in second place after GD.

A Model for Other Countries of the Eastern Partnership. Regardless of the negative features of political life of Georgia, a weak understanding of the mechanisms of local democracy in society, and too superficial changes introduced by the present law on local government, the process of the transfer of power to the local level has begun. Direct elections of local government chairpersons translate into greater participation by local communities in the decision-making process, and should enhance the sense of community responsibility for the situation in any given city or municipality.

Georgian local government reform may become a model for other EaP countries, just as, effective police reform under the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili became a model for other countries in the region. Those changes led to a significant reduction in widespread corruption among the police, and increased professionalism, resulting in a significant reduction in crime.

The Georgian experience can be especially important for Ukraine, particularly in terms of meeting concerns about possible strengthening of separatist tendencies as a result of strengthening the powers of self-governments. The government in Tbilisi, like the authorities in Kyiv, is struggling with the problem of separatism. In both countries, part of the political elite and society are wary of strengthening the powers of the regions. The result of local government reform should, however, be more effective problem-solving on a local level, by representatives of the local population in local government, including regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. This in turn should reduce the scale of their support for the idea of separatism. At the same time, decentralisation does not mean increasing regional autonomy or federalisation, which in Ukraine and Georgia could actually pose a threat to the territorial integrity of the state.

Next Steps. The changes were made possible thanks to the political will of the current ruling coalition. Now, however, it is important that this is supported by a good conceptual and organisational preparation of the next stage of reform. Failure to change regulations in matters of the competences and finances of local government may result in a loss of support, both from the public, and from external donors. The existing assistance of international institutions and experts from other countries was too dispersed. Better coordinated external expert help will facilitate work on new regulations and their implementation.

In subsequent actions, more importance should be attached to the public debate. On the one hand, local communities should be encouraged to discuss new solutions, while on the other, the idea of self-government must also be promoted. Communities of post-Soviet countries are accustomed to centralism, and people believe that the only effective and decisive vote could come from the state capital. The government could become the initiator and coordinator of the campaign, with the aim of convincing society that decentralisation does not mean separatism, but is a way to increase the efficiency of public services provided by local authorities. A well-functioning local government is also one of the conditions for the development of entrepreneurship in the country. NGOs and local public opinion leaders should be invited to promote the idea of local government. In addition to meetings and lectures, both very important in promotional activities, the public media, especially television, should be engaged.

Although decentralisation and regional development are important factors highlighted in the EaP initiative, there is a lack of support instruments for local governments. During the current discussion on the successes, failures and possible innovations of the EaP, it is worth considering the creation of a mechanism to support local authorities in the countries of the region. Expert assistance, training and internships for officials would be important elements in the implementation of the reform. Support for programmes concentrating on exchange of experience between local governments of the EU and the EaP states, and the implementation of specific projects that facilitate the process of change and strengthening local government, could also play an important role. Funded programmes could add an important dimension to educational activities. Showing the decentralisation processes in other countries can be a crucial element of education for people engaged in the business of local governments, but also for local communities, which are the main beneficiaries of the reform.