

Western powers rush to recognise result of Georgian presidential election

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Mikhail Saakashvili has been re-elected president of Georgia following balloting on January 5. According to the country's Central Election Commission (CEC), he received 52.2 percent of the votes. This compares to the 25.3 percent polled by his nearest rival, Levan Gachechiladze, leader of the United Public Movement, a bloc of nine opposition parties formed last year. Just 40,000 votes gave Saakashvili an absolute majority and saved him from a second round of balloting.

The opposition claims it has evidence of fraud that invalidated up to 100,000 votes and will call demonstrations next week if the courts do not intervene. Gachechiladze accused Saakashvili of cheating and demanded that CEC chairman Levan Tarkhnishvili resign. Another opposition leader, David Usupashvili, said that the early declaration of Saakashvili's victory was "more than unusual and highly suspicious."

The Western powers' rush to legitimise the election result and declare Saakashvili victorious was in marked contrast to the bitter attacks made on the Russian parliamentary elections held on December 2 when the leader of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly, Göran Lennmarker, declared, "It was not a fair election."

This time, the chief of the OSCE electoral monitoring mission in Georgia, US congressman Alcee Hastings, did not even wait for the polling to finish before declaring—on the morning of January 5—that democracy had taken a triumphant step in Georgia and that "by virtue of hard competition during the election campaign, I think, these elections were the choice of the Georgian nation."

By the following morning, January 6, the OSCE had already managed to publish and distribute a 10-page *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, which became the source of further pronouncements by Western leaders that the country had had its "first genuinely competitive presidential election." They stressed the report's conclusions that the election was "in essence consistent" with most OSCE and Council of Europe "commitments and standards for democratic elections" and called for patience with regard to the "significant challenges which need to be addressed."

In a statement issued on January 7, the US State Department

called on Georgian politicians to accept the results and "work peacefully and responsibly for a democratic Georgia." The European Union (EU) followed suit, adding, "All political forces should maintain a dialogue in order to deal with the challenges ahead, including those identified by international observers, before the parliamentary elections in the spring. The EU is ready to assist Georgia in moving forward towards the next elections."

NATO spokesman James Appathurai weighed in on January 8, saying the election was "a viable expression of the free choice of the Georgian people" and promised to step up the military bloc's "intensified dialogue" with the country.

In contrast, the Russian Foreign Ministry condemned Hastings's "premature" and "superficial" remarks about "the triumph of Georgian democracy" and stated that the election campaign was not "free and fair." It claimed that the media, non-governmental organisations and opposition figures had reported numerous cases of violations of the electoral laws by the state and that "the presidential race was marked by the widespread use of administrative resources, open pressure on opposition candidates and severe limitations on their access to financial and media sources." The Foreign Ministry statement reminded its readers that the election campaign "was actually launched against the background of a state of emergency."

The OSCE report completely glosses over the events that led up to the calling of the state emergency and the snap election that followed and revises earlier drafts—"spinning" events—in order to help justify the outcome they had already decided.

The report records how Saakashvili imposed a state of emergency on November 7, after six days of demonstrations culminating in the "violent dispersal" of protesters by police. On the same day, the report simply states that the pro-opposition Imedi TV was "raided" by police and "only able to resume broadcasting" on December 12. On November 8, the then-president "proposed to shorten his mandate" and resigned on November 25 allowing parliament to call an extraordinary presidential election on January 5.

The full extent of that "violent dispersal" and the "raid" is not mentioned. According to the Human Rights Watch report, *Crossing the Line* (December 2007), some 50,000 demonstrators were peacefully calling for parliamentary

elections in early 2008 and the release of individuals they regarded as political prisoners. Demands were made for Saakashvili to resign. The police and army used “violent and excessive force” involving tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets against fleeing protesters that resulted in hundreds of people requiring hospital treatment. They then attacked the Imedi TV station, beat up journalists and smashed up their broadcasting equipment so extensively that it took the company more than a month and well into the election campaign before it could begin transmissions again.

Reading the *First Interim Report* (December 6-13), the *Second Interim Report* (December 14-24) and the January 6 statement, it is clear that sentences have been removed or inserted and conclusions watered down or beefed up in order to support the conclusion desired by the West.

Thus, the “reported considerable damage” to Imedi TV equipment highlighted in earlier drafts disappears without explanation, as do opposition claims that figures of Georgian citizens registered abroad by diplomatic missions were “unrealistically low.”

The first interim report highlighted concern about amendments made on November 22 and December 12 to the Unified Election Code, which governs election procedures, saying “such late amendments are generally inconsistent with good practice in electoral matters.” The latest report reverses things entirely, saying, “the recent amendments in the election code—though adopted very late—enhanced the inclusiveness of the election administration by introducing political party representation into the CEC.”

In a similar way, “The election campaign is being conducted in a highly polarised political environment. Opposition candidates express deep mistrust in the election administration and lack confidence in the fairness of the electoral process,” became: “The highly polarised political environment, the lack of trust, the pervasiveness of alleged violations, speculation about post-election demonstrations and accusations of preparations for a coup, were not conducive to a constructive, issue-based election campaign. Opposition candidates expressed a deep mistrust of the election administration and the authorities.” The later version has been spun to give the impression of an embattled state winning through against all the odds whilst the reference to the opposition’s confidence in the fairness of the electoral process has disappeared.

The final report saw the sudden appearance of words such as “greater political inclusiveness,” “transparency” and, above all, the sentence, “the first genuinely competitive presidential election in Georgia,” which became the catchphrase of all the Western leaders.

For the time being, the Western powers are backing Saakashvili, who ousted their previous protégé, Eduard Shevardnadze, in the so-called “Rose Revolution” in 2003. Shevardnadze, who had oriented Georgia towards the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was considered too weak

in his dealings with Russia and insufficiently willing to transform Georgia into a full-blown pro-American outpost on Russia’s southwestern border, committed to Western geopolitical interests in the Eurasian region.

However, the collapse of Saakashvili’s popular support—he received 96 percent of the vote in uncontested elections in 2004—and the destabilisation of Georgia, more generally, signals the growth of an increasingly explosive combination of internal and external factors.

During Saakashvili’s rule, Georgia has been transformed into a free market trade zone with minimal taxes on investment and the rich. The World Bank has praised the government’s wholesale privatisation and deregulation, which led to the country being named the top “reformer” in the world in 2006. But while a narrow elite has enriched itself, the mass of the population remains mired in poverty and surrounded by squalor, crime and corruption. According to the International Monetary Fund, poverty levels remain at about 30 percent and unemployment is increasing. Distrust in the judiciary has soared from 36 percent of respondents in 2004 to 62 percent in 2006.

The Georgian opposition has sought to manipulate popular hostility to Saakashvili’s rule, but it is led by rival oligarchs such as Gachechiladze and Patarkatsishvili (co-owner of Imedi TV along with Rupert Murdoch), who actively assisted and even financed his rise to power but have since fallen out bitterly with their former leader over his monopoly on power and the way it has encroached on their own business activities. They have no progressive programme for the working class, being fully committed to the pro-Western market reforms espoused by Saakashvili.

The regime of President Putin in Moscow has responded to the Saakashvili administration’s subordination to the West with a series of provocations of its own. The protracted conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi over the breakaway Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has intensified recently with the West’s promotion of Kosovan independence. Russian troop movements are said to have increased in the provinces, and, in retaliation for Georgia expelling Russian diplomats following accusations of espionage, Putin immediately placed an indefinite embargo on Georgian exports to Russian markets and ordered the repatriation of thousands of Georgian workers from Russia.



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