

SAAKASHVILI'S LEAD NOW IRREVERSIBLE IN GEORGIA'S PRESIDENTIAL VOTE-COUNTING

By Vladimir Socor

Data released by Georgia's Central Electoral Commission (CEC) on January 11 indicate that Mikheil Saakashvili has narrowly but irreversibly won reelection as president in the first round. Saakashvili has garnered 53.38% of the votes counted; runner-up Levan Gachechiladze, 25.66%; and five other candidates, the remainder. Voter turnout was slightly over 56%.

The CEC has counted more than 98% of the total number of votes cast; completed the count in 3,439 precincts, out of 3,511; and has invalidated the returns from half a dozen precincts, presumably for recounts there. Even if opposition candidates would win all the still-uncounted ballots in all of the remaining precincts, it would not be enough for cutting Saakashvili's lead below 50% and forcing a runoff.

Realizing this fact, opposition leaders oscillate between demanding a recount and demanding a runoff. Some oppositionists are making both demands at the same time, on the same logic they had used throughout the campaign: The opposition can only win; any other outcome would mean that the election was rigged.

On the opposition's behalf, the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA) has filed complaints over the balloting in several precincts, mostly located within the cities of Tbilisi, Batumi, and Kutaisi (Georgia's three largest cities). These turned out to be opposition strongholds, as Saakashvili received less than 50% of the city-wide vote in each of these three cities. Apparently, the opposition hopes to increase its margin further through its challenges there. GYLA planned to challenge the returns in some 30 precincts, but has admitted that even if recounts go in the opposition's favor, it would still not suffice for reversing Saakashvili's victory country-wide (see EDM, January 8). Unlike GYLA's lawyers, the political leaders of the opposition have submitted very little material evidence to the CEC or the courts thus far, but are airing vocal complaints through the media and foreign missions.

Following a visit at CEC headquarters on January 10, U.S. Ambassador John Tefft expressed satisfaction with the information received, noting however some "minor discrepancies" that need to be cleared up through due process in the courts (Interpress, Rustavi-2 TV, January 10). In Washington, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matt Bryza reiterated that the U.S. government shares the OSCE's and Council of Europe's assessment of this election as "complying with basic international standards and as the most competitive in Georgia's history;" but that "it did not go without irregularities," which should be addressed and corrected ahead of the parliamentary elections that are expected in the spring (Mze TV, January 10).

Thus far, Russia is the only country to have declared Georgia's election undemocratic and, implicitly, invalid (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release, January 8) in contrast to all Western assessments of the election.

Meanwhile, German diplomat Dieter Boden, head of the OSCE/ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) election observation mission in Georgia, has struck an individual note that seems to break with the Western consensus. Boden chose to be interviewed by the leftist newspaper Frankfurter Rundschau, which quotes him as challenging the accuracy of the vote-count in a sweeping manner. Boden's remarks, as quoted, clearly if implicitly question the election's overall outcome (Frankfurter Rundschau, January 10).

German mainstream media do not seem to have picked up the story, apparently doubting its veracity. Spokesmen for the OSCE/ODIHR mission in Tbilisi tell local media that Boden's remarks were reproduced incompletely and taken out of context. Boden himself has yet to disown the interview. Meanwhile, Russian media are playing it up and Russian authorities are exploiting it. They cite it as showing that Western election observers had "lied," according to Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Duma's international affairs committee (DPA, Interfax, January 10). According to Kremlin political consultant Sergei Markov, "We must fully welcome this statement and endorse it, it could become a huge trump card for the [Georgian] opposition Boden's confession will probably be followed by an avalanche of statements about vote-rigging." Markov notes that Boden "dared" to express his personal view, but not as the OSCE's view (Interfax, January 10).

However incompletely rendered by the German newspaper, Boden's interview is not his first discordant note in the chorus of Western observers of the Georgian presidential election. At the height of the campaign in late December, the OSCE/ODIHR observation mission issued an Interim Report no. 2 (14-21 December) that in many of its points extrapolated and generalized from merely anecdotal evidence or blurred the line between allegation and fact. On December 31, Georgia's Interagency Task Force for Free and Fair Elections (an ad hoc group chaired by Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze for liaising with international observers) presented a detailed factual critique of that report. It was the only case in which the Georgian authorities identified inaccuracies in a document emanating from the international observers of this election. Boden's staff is now preparing a follow-up report which is due in the next few days and is expected again to focus on purported violations of democracy in Georgia.

(Civil Georgia, Messenger, Rustavi-2 and Mze televisions, January 9, 10)

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