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## Implication of Increased Anti-Western Propaganda in the Election Results

Teona Turashvili, Tbilisi

### Abstract

A gradual decrease in the level of public trust toward Western institutions has been observed in recent years in Georgia. Nevertheless, a substantial majority of Georgians still supports the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and this majority appears resilient to increasing anti-Western propaganda. It is particularly interesting to examine whether these recent developments influenced the final results of Georgia's recent parliamentary elections. The article seeks to demonstrate that the political dimension of the anti-Western propaganda campaign appeared less successful than its cultural and social dimensions.

### Introduction

Georgia has generally been regarded as a predominantly pro-European country in which NATO and the European Union (EU) have enjoyed solid support not only from major political forces but also from the general public. However, certain changes have been witnessed in the country in recent years. On the one hand, Euro-skepticism has been on the rise among the Georgian public. On the other hand, specific political groups have advocated altering Georgia's pro-Western orientation. At the same time, the Georgian Dream government sought to adopt new approaches in its relations with Russia to avoid another confrontation with its northern neighbor. This new strategy met with criticism from the main opposition force, the United National Movement (UNM), which accused the government of making concessions to Russia.

The results of the October parliamentary elections could offer valuable insights into the potential implications of growing anti-Western narratives in the country.

In that regard, an overview of the election programs and statements from major political parties with regard to the issues involving the EU, NATO, Russia and other neighboring countries is essential.

### Foreign Policy Priorities in Political Party Programs

A content analysis showed that there is consensus regarding Georgia's membership in the EU among political elites, as these elites campaigned to deepen the country's relations with the EU. However, as some experts argued, both the GD and UNM programs lack a precise or realistic strategy to achieve their declarations.<sup>1</sup>

The third party, the Alliance of Patriots, obtained six seats in the parliament in the most recent elections. Although its members support Georgia's aspirations to integrate into the European structure, its program none-

theless did not include any concrete steps that might be taken in this direction.

Other pro-Western parties, which did not clear the 5% threshold to enter the new parliament, such as the Republican Party, Irakli Alasania's Free Democrats and Paata Burchuladze—State for People, made similar promises. The Republican Party even proposed to apply for EU membership in the near future. Additionally, its leaders initiated the drafting of constitutional amendments and amending the preamble to the Constitution to read that the Georgian people aspire to “establish a full-fledged place in the security and cooperation system of the democratic Euro-Atlantic states.” Even the leader of the Democratic Movement—United Georgia, Nino Burjanadze, who is widely considered a “pro-Russian politician”, has not opposed Georgia's aspirations for European integration. Nevertheless, she openly campaigned for Georgia's inclusion within the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.

However, there are significant contradictions with regard to NATO. While liberal and pro-European political parties see membership in NATO as their end goal, the Alliance of Patriots and Burjanadze's Democratic Movement are openly skeptical of or even against NATO membership. Some leading figures in the Republican Party went even further and called for an American military base to be opened on the country's soil until Georgia could join NATO as a full member. Conversely, according to the website of the Alliance of Patriots, since NATO members are not ready to incorporate Georgia into the bloc, Georgians should not “deceive themselves” with unrealistic “expectations”, and greater efforts should therefore be devoted to European integration.<sup>2</sup> As for Burjanadze's vision, she campaigned on enshrining non-bloc status in Georgia's Constitution. Consequently, she directly opposed any collaboration with

1 Luka Pertaia. “West or Russia? What Political Parties Are Offering Us?” *Netgazeti.Ge*. October 7, 2016 {Georgian} Retrieved from: <<http://netgazeti.ge/news/141348/>>

2 Please see the website of the Alliance of Patriots: <<http://patriots.ge/our-vision-program/>>

NATO, maintaining that her proposal would lead the country to unification, economic success and progress.

The various positions of the political parties regarding Russia and other neighbors are also notable. While GD leaders plan to continue a so-called “pragmatic approach”, implying easing tensions with Russia and having a face-to-face dialogue on economic and social matters, the UNM prioritizes building international consensus on the policy of non-recognition of breakaway regions. Meanwhile, the ruling party also asserted that normalization of relations would not occur at the expense of Georgia’s “substantial interests” (implying territorial integrity). UNM also mentions building peaceful resolutions to conflicts with Russia; however, compared to GD, its approach to this matter is relatively passive, as its program argues that the prospects of normalization depend on “Russia’s willingness to change its position on occupied territories.”

Key figures in the Alliance of Patriots believe that finding common ground with Russia is essential to conflict resolution. In addition to engaging with the Russian Federation, they support the involvement of Europe and the United States in this process.

As for the political parties left outside the legislative body, the Free Democrats stress the need for formal and informal negotiations with Russia to deescalate the current tension. In contrast, Burjanadze advocates avoiding the use of the terms “occupant” or “occupation” when talking about Russia. In her opinion, it is Georgia that should show and convince Russia that it is not a threat to Russian national interests. According to some experts, such an approach arguably means abandoning Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic ambitions.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to other neighbors, the political parties’ programs were limited to broad statements about economic cooperation and people-to-people contacts. The only exception was the Alliance of Patriots, which actively cultivated anti-Turkish sentiments with the help of its television channel, Obieqtivi TV. Its authorities assert that the Turkish government is aiming to seize Adjara and Abkhazia. Additionally, the Alliance of Patriots strongly opposed the construction of a new mosque for the Muslim minority in Batumi. In general, they have used xenophobic, pseudo-nationalist and homophobic rhetoric extensively over the past years. In essence, a substantial part of their program was devoted

to their reflections about patriotism, summed up as follows: “Georgian soul, values and spirit”.

Thus, despite general consensus among the political parties regarding the EU, anti-NATO arguments have gradually come to flourish. Even more, this is the first time since the Rose Revolution that an undoubtedly pro-Russian party, Centrists Khachishvili-Bedukadze, has attempted to register for the elections with the promises of Russian pensions, Russian military bases in Georgia and dual Georgian/Russian citizenship. Another important aspect was the inclusion of a so-called “pro-Georgian”, i.e., nationalist, narrative in the political discourse, which was chiefly exploited by a conservative segment of society.

### Public Perceptions about the West

Growing anti-Western sentiments were also reflected in public perceptions. Recent surveys suggest that pro-European attitudes are on the decline, whereas pro-Russian attitudes are on the rise among the population. Overall, the proportion of people supporting EU membership has dropped from 79 percent to 61 percent since 2009. A similar trend was observed with regard to NATO membership, which was supported by 57 percent of the respondents in 2015, compared to 68 percent in 2009.<sup>4</sup>

The issue of ethnic minorities should be highlighted when discussing the scope of Euroscepticism in Georgia. Surveys showed that European integration enjoys relatively low support among ethnic Azerbaijanis and Armenians residing outside the capital. While membership in the EU and NATO is supported by a vast majority of Georgians (83 percent and 74 percent, respectively), only up to two-fifths of minorities share the same position (38 percent and 31 percent, respectively).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, although a significant proportion of Georgians (38 percent) considers the EU Georgia’s best ally, Russia is perceived as the nation’s closest friend by most minorities (57%).<sup>6</sup>

As far as cultural matters are concerned, an increasing number of Georgians believe that the EU threatens their traditions. While the share of Euroskeptics fluctuated around twenty percent until 2013, this portion exceeded one-third of the population in 2015.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the percentage of respondents who argued that EU membership might result in disrespect for Georgian traditions doubled, reaching 28 percent.<sup>8</sup>

3 Luka Pertaia. “West or Russia? What Political Parties Are Offering Us?” *Netgazeti.Ge*. October 7, 2016 {Georgian} Retrieved from: <<http://netgazeti.ge/news/141348/>>

4 The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2009–2015) “Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia”. Retrieved through ODA—<<http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/>> on November 3, 2016.

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

## Possible Reasons for Increased Anti-Western Narratives in Georgia

One of the major reasons for emerging anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments might be the narrative of particular Western countries being reluctant to support Georgia in counterbalancing Russia's political pressure. Such rhetoric was particularly successful after the Russia–Georgia war in 2008, which was not followed by any sanctions against Russia unlike those that were imposed after Russian military intervention in Ukraine. Additionally, despite the European Commission's positive report on visa liberalization progress, the process was delayed several times, and its final realization still requires approval from other EU institutions.

Apart from public frustration resulting from the prolonged visa liberalization talks and no progress on NATO membership, deliberate distribution of anti-Western narratives played a crucial role. Georgia thus became a subject of growing Russian propaganda since 2013, as the number of websites, Internet-based TV channels, non-profit organizations and political groups inciting anti-Western sentiments has proliferated since that time.<sup>9</sup>

The content analyses of the messages of Russia's soft power agent revealed that by circulating half-true or simply untrue information, they aimed at disseminating false images of the West and Russia. For these purposes, several narratives were propagated among the Georgian audience, including the following: a) Euro-Atlantic integration as an unrealistic expectation; b) NATO as an obstacle to restoring Georgia's territorial integrity; c) incompatibility of Western values with Georgian values; d) the United States and, in particular, Turkey as unreliable partners for Georgia.<sup>10</sup>

Cultural and social aspects of stereotypes about the West were the most effective in predominantly traditional Georgian society. In particular, as concluded by the study prepared by the European Initiative—Liberty Academy Tbilisi (EI-LAT), Russian propaganda extensively employed political myths and stereotypes of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities in cultivating xenophobic and homophobic sentiments. As a result, “Russia [presents] itself as Georgia's only ally with common identity, religious faith, history and culture. Meanwhile, it portrays the West as a threat to all the above-

mentioned values.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Media Development Fund reported, that anti-Western rhetoric was typically applied in xenophobic and homophobic contexts.<sup>12</sup>

Thereafter, some conservative priests began to express anti-Western myths and stereotypes, particularly with regard to LGBT society and gay marriage. A clear confirmation of Russian propaganda being successful in this regard was the promise by the leader of the ruling party to make constitutional amendments to define the term “family” at the constitutional level.

## Conclusions from Election Results

Despite a number of differences in the foreign policy priorities of GD and UNM, it is expected that both will continue their support for Euro-Atlantic policies in parliament. As for the Alliance of Patriots—known for its Euroskeptic and anti-NATO rhetoric—its six MPs will not afford it enough power to modify the country's declared foreign policy priorities in the short run. However, its leaders can also further incite anti-Western sentiments in Georgian society and slow down the reform agenda. In addition, the failure of some liberal parties to secure seats in the parliament coupled with the success of the Alliance of Patriots demonstrate that Georgia's pro-European stance should not be taken for granted.

It is difficult to argue that the poor performance of some liberal parties in the elections is closely related to the growth in Russian's recent soft power. Among other political mistakes, they failed to meet public expectations. Surveys demonstrated that economic problems, such as unemployment, poverty, and inflation, were the top priorities for Georgia's citizens, while the campaigns of the liberal parties concentrated on foreign policy and general liberal principles, largely ignoring domestic challenges.

In addition, most of these parties attempted to portray themselves as a greater pro-Western political force than the ruling party. UNM members applied similar tactics, as they criticized the government for making concessions to Russia.

In spite of these accusations, as the results of public opinion polls suggest, EU and NATO advocates were distributed almost equally among the major political forces (excluding the Alliance of Patriots).<sup>13</sup>

9 Levan Avalishvili, Giorgi Lomtadze and Alexander Kevkhishvili, “Kremlin's Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda”, *Institute for Development of Freedom of Information*, September 1, 2016, p. 6 Retrieved from: <<http://bit.ly/2c7K7T4>>

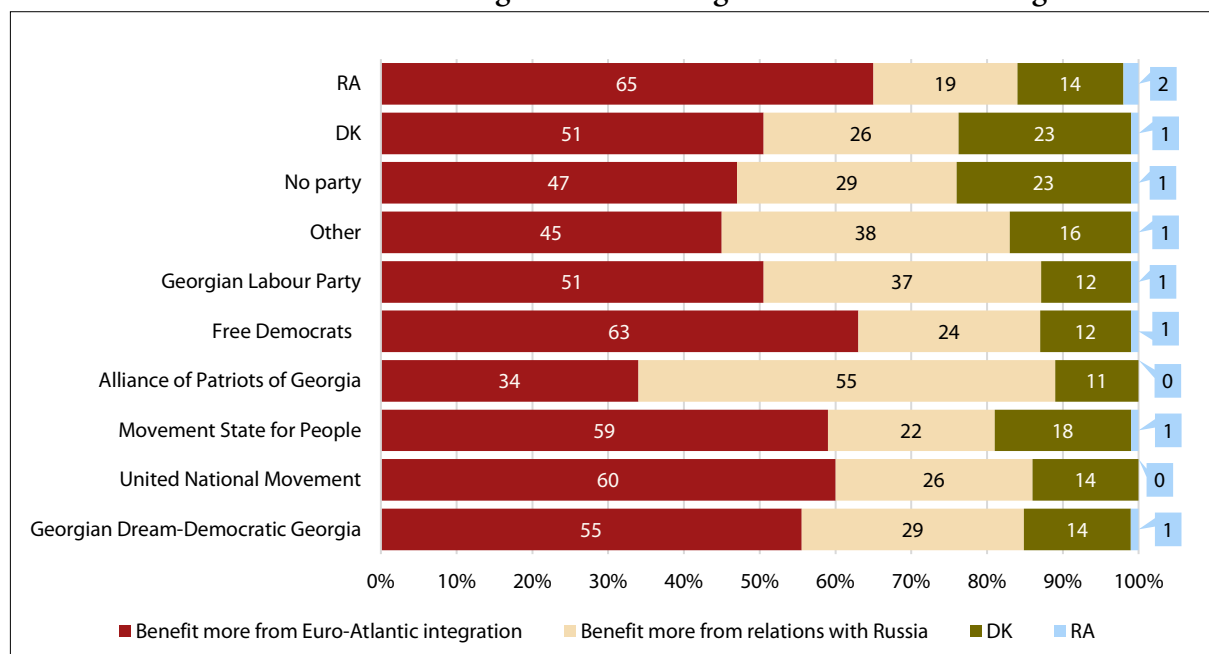
10 Ibid., p. 9

11 Lasha Tughushi, “Threats of Russian Hard and Soft Power in Georgia”, *European Initiative—Liberal Academy Tbilisi*. 2016. Retrieved from: <<http://bit.ly/2f7O9PA>>

12 Tamar Kintsurashvili, Sopho Gogadze, Tata Kapianidze and Tamuna Kandelaki, “Anti-Western propaganda. Media monitoring report 2014–2015”, *Media Development Fund*. June, 2015. Retrieved from: <<http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/15>>

13 The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016) “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2016”. Retrieved through ODA—<<http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/>> on November 2, 2016.

**Figure 1: Which Statement Do You Agree With? For/Against Euro-Atlantic Integration**  
By  
**Which Statement Do You Agree With? For/Against Euro-Atlantic Integration**



Source: *The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016) "NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2016". Retrieved through ODA—<http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/> on November 2, 2016.*

This scenario may be the result of certain feasible foreign policy achievements of the GD government. In particular, in 2014, Georgia signed an Associate Agreement with the EU. Although no tangible steps were taken in terms of Georgia's long-awaited membership in NATO, new forms of cooperation have become possible since 2012 (for instance, a joint training center in Georgia and a memorandum on "deepening the defense and security partnership" between the U.S. and Georgia).

As far as legitimization of pro-Russian political discourse is concerned, Nino Burjanadze's failure nonetheless indicates modest achievements in this regard. However, Euroskepticism obscured by national narratives

turned out to make the pro-Russian movement a success by launching a newly formed political party with enough votes to enter the parliament.

Thus, it could be assumed that cultural and social—rather than political—aspects of anti-Western propaganda have more potential for exerting influence on Georgia's foreign policy orientation in the long run. This could be useful guidance for Georgia's Western partners in devising effective communication strategies with Georgian citizens and to introducing them to European commitments to respecting different cultures and diversity.

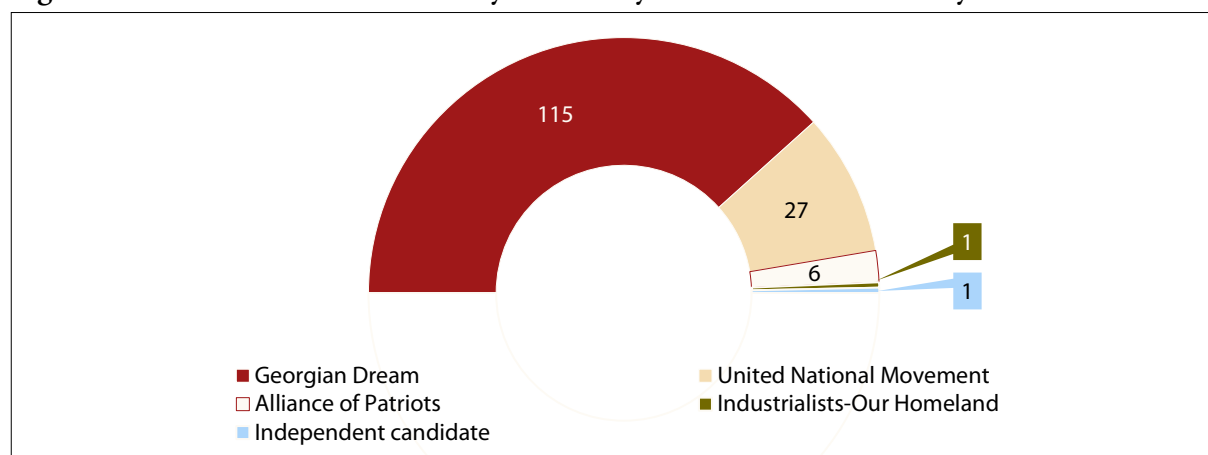
#### *About the Author*

Teona Turashvili holds an M.A. in Political Sciences from the University of Warsaw. Currently she is working at the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI).

## DOCUMENTATION

## The Results of the Georgian Parliamentary Elections

Figure 1: Number of Seats Received by Each Party after 2016 Parliamentary Elections



Source: News.on.ge <<https://on.ge/elections/2016/results>> November 2, 2016

Table 1: Percentage of Votes Received by Each Party in the 2016 Parliamentary Elections (Proportional Vote on Party Lists)

Political Party	Votes received (%)
Georgian Dream	48.68%
United National Movement	27.11%
Alliance of Patriots	5.01%
Free Democrats	4.63%
State for the People	3.45%
Democratic Movement	3.53%
Labour Party	3.14%
Republican Party	1.55%
For Peaceful Georgia	0.22%
Progressive Democratic Movement	0.06%
Georgian Group	0.12%
For United Georgia	0.16%
People's Government	0.05%
Communist Party of Georgia – Stalinists	0.1%
Socialist Workers' Party	0.04%
Georgia's United Communist Party	0.08%
Georgia	0.09%
Georgian Idea	0.17%
Industrialists – Our Homeland	0.78%
Merab Kostava Society	0.05%
Ours – People's Party	0.09%
Leftist Alliance	0.04%
National Forum	0.73%
In the Name of the Lord	0.08%
Our Georgia	0.05%

Source: Central Election Commission of Georgia <http://results20161008.ccc.gov.ge/>, Voter Turnout <<http://cesko.ge/geo/static/2412/amomrchevelta-aqtivoba>> November 3, 2016

**Table 2: Percentage of Votes Received by Each Party in the 2012 Parliamentary Elections**

Party	Votes received (%)
Georgian Dream	54.97%
United National Movement	40.34%
Christian Democratic Movement	2.04%
Labour Party	1.24%
New Rights Movement	0.43%
National Democratic Party	0.14%
For a Fair Georgia	0.19%
Merab Kostava Society	0.05%
Sportsmen Union	0.07%
Free Georgia	0.27%
Freedom Party	0.05%
Georgian Group	0.11%
Future Georgia	0.03%
Labour Council of Georgia	0.03%
Public Movement	0.03%
People's Party	0.02%

Source: Central Election Commission of Georgia <<http://results2012.ccc.gov.ge/>> November 3, 2016

**Table 3: Percentage of Votes Received by Each Party in the 2008 Parliamentary Elections**

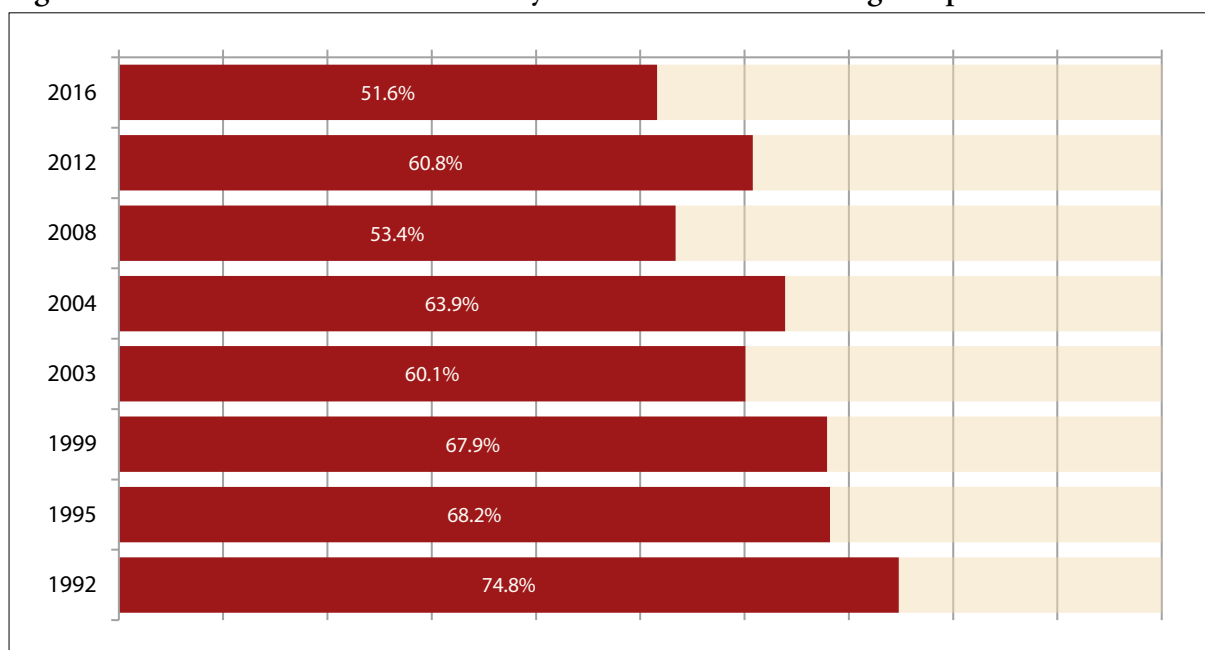
Party	Votes received (%)
United National Movement	58.53%
United Opposition-National Council-New Rights	17.54%
Christian-Democratic Party	8.56%
Labor Party	7.36%
Republican Party	3.74%
New Rights Alliance – Topadze Industrialists	0.92%
Christian-Democratic Alliance	0.88%
Georgian Politics	0.46%
Traditionalists Party – Our Georgia-Women's Party	0.44%
Sportsmen Union	0.18%
National Movement of Radical Democrats of Georgia	0.18%
Our Country	0.12%

Source: Election Guide, Democracy Assistance and Election News, <<http://www.electionguide.org/results.php?ID=1412>> November 3, 2016

**Table 4: Percentage of Votes Received by Each Party in the 2004 Parliamentary Elections**

Political Party	Votes received (%)
National Movement-Democratic Front	67.75%
Industrialists and New Rights	7.74%
Labour Party of Georgia	6.14%
Freedom – Konstantine Z. Gamsakhurdia	4.49%
Democratic Revival Union	3.95%
NDP – Traditionalists	2.61%
Ertroba Bloc	2.53%
Others	4.79%

Source: *Election Guide, Democracy Assistance and Election News*, <<http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/1380/>> November 3, 2016

**Figure 2: Voter Turnout for Parliamentary Elections Since Obtaining Independence**

Sources: *Central Election Commission of Georgia* <<http://cesko.ge/geo/static/2412/amomrchevelta-aqtivoba>>, *Election Guide, Democracy Assistance and Election News* <<http://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/81/>>, *Central Election Commission of Georgia* <<http://cesko.ge/geo/static/385/aqtivoba-2012>>, *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)* <<http://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/109/40>>, November 4, 2016