

"What Will They Think About Us?" The Importance of International Recognition of Elections

Shirinov, Rashad

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Shirinov, R. (2015). "What Will They Think About Us?" The Importance of International Recognition of Elections. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 79, 13-18. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-89869-6>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

“What Will They Think About Us?”: The Importance of International Recognition of Elections

By Rashad Shirinov, Baku

Abstract

This article deals with the question of democratic legitimacy and analyzes the importance of international recognition of elections for newly independent countries. Taking the case of the November 1, 2015 Parliamentary Election in Azerbaijan, I look into the question of why it is so important for the Azerbaijani elites to be recognized as a democracy. Among other things, I argue that the democratic ideal has become “commercialized” and is being used as a tool of hegemony by various bigger states towards smaller ones in international politics. The use of the tool of external recognition for democratic elections by the Russian Federation proves the claim of instrumentalization of the concept.

Introduction

In a famous Soviet movie called “Osenniy marafon” (Autumn Marathon) two Russian men and one Dane are drinking vodka one morning in the kitchen of a St. Petersburg apartment. When one of the Russians refuses to drink with the excuse of work the other Russian tells him that he should drink, “otherwise what will he (the Dane) think about us?”

Professionals working with the post-Soviet space know that most of the time it, indeed, looks like this. There is strong pressure, in many areas, sometimes cultural sometimes moral to “be or behave like them”. This type of motivation has paved the way for various interesting developments in the post-Soviet space. Election practice is only one of them, but an extremely important one, because it shows “that we are a democracy, just like them”.

My aim in this article is about trying to shed light on the question of international recognition of the elections in general and to discuss specifically what happened during the November 1 Parliamentary Election in Azerbaijan this year.

My central argument is that post-Soviet hybrid regimes turned into what they currently are because of the pressure of the global environment and commitments they took vis-à-vis the international community.

Election Background

On November 1, 2015, Azerbaijan held its fifth parliamentary election since independence. The results of the election were not a surprise for many. The ruling party candidates together with non-partisan candidates took the majority of seats. Additionally, candidates from a dozen so-called opposition parties obtained one to two seats each. It is important to note that normally non-partisan MPs and MPs from opposition parties vote in line with the ruling party in the parliament and the composition of the parliament should be viewed as one

solid bloc rather than a community of various political ideologies. This is not to say, though, that the Azerbaijani parliament is completely politically neutral, since some of the MPs seem to be related to particular power groups and/or powerful people inside the state system (they can be called “oligarchs”).

Accordingly, the role of the parliament is formal and many understand that it is the agreement and consensus among the groups inside the state rather than the voters’ will which defines the composition of the parliament.

Ultimately, the role of the parliament in Azerbaijani power politics is quite passive, and it is heavily subordinated to the executive. The parliament is in fact a reliable safeguard of the strong domination of the executive and a good legitimating tool for the ruling elite. Its strong attachment to the executive power makes the legislating process smooth and compliant with the dominant interests of the executive leaders.

Nevertheless, there is also an ambiguity here. As opposed to the role it plays now, parliament’s potential functionality is much higher. The parliament, indeed, has potential powers (historically and through the constitution) to be functionally transformed into a vigorous challenger to the executive branch. This is what happened on the eve of independence, when power was changing hands through the decisions made at the sessions of the then Supreme Soviet (in Azeri: “Ali Sovet”); in effect, the legitimation of power took place through this body. Parliament was the institution, which legalized the return of the former communist leader Heydar Aliyev as the country’s leader in 1993.

Also, it seems that the parliament in Azerbaijan is one of the most visible elements of the liberal-democratic form, of representative democracy as members of the parliament are elected from constituencies and formally they are supposed to represent citizens. Certainly, there are other institutions pointing to formal democracy like elections (in general), the Commissioner on

Human Rights (Ombudsman), elected local self-governance, among others. However, the parliament stands out as the biggest semi-independent collective body, which has the capacity to challenge executive power.

The False Appeal of Democracy

Here, an important question should be asked: What were the reasons for this sort of hybrid governance to emerge in some countries in the post-Soviet area? Among other things, I link it to the appeal of democracy and will elaborate on this.

For most of the post-independence period, “democracy” was a widespread, hard-to-challenge and almost hegemonic concept in the public discourse. Although there was resistance from the so-called “old guard” (sometimes in the form of identifying democracy and freedom with chaos and anarchy) this could not damage the globally backed normative appeal of democracy and its supporters have had moral superiority and the intellectual upper hand in all debates. The discourse of democracy was prevailing.

The third wave of democratization, which began in the mid-1970s (Huntington), and democracy’s success in Eastern Europe in the post-1990s has turned the concept into a political fashion. Almost all post-Soviet states declared themselves a democracy and started (or at least pretended) to implement liberal-democratic reforms. Newly independent states also declared their loyalty to the democratic way because this is what the superpowers demanded from them. It was sort of a carrot, reflection of the soft power, and element of the “cultural hegemony” of the West.

The idea of democracy has become popular because its appeal was a popular one. It addressed the issue of human life and governance with the attractive appeal of “power to the people” (almost in the same manner as Soviet rule used similar slogans) after the long years of the Soviet totalitarian regime.

Because it was the “promotion of democracy”, the democratic form of government was portrayed as the best one. Also because it succeeded in Western Europe and the United States, it was assumed that it should succeed elsewhere. The normative character of the discourse of democracy as the best form of government dwarfed the balanced debate around it as just a form of government, which mostly gained importance and popularity in the second half of the 20th century in Western Europe and later in other regions around the world.

Although after some period of time Western leaders and decision-makers realized that democratic rule was not so simple to implement in most of the areas of the former Soviet Union, the West, and particularly, the United States did not give up on the idea of promoting

democracy and continued to include the discourse into its programs and policies. It is hard to say whether, with or without support from the West, but in some places democratic elections did take place, paving the way for the establishment of renewed forms of governance. The cases of Georgia and Ukraine are quite exemplary in this regard. In Georgia, the rule of President Shevardnadze was replaced by the popular rule of President Saakashvili. Charles Fairbanks claims that Saakashvili’s policies aimed more at modernizing rather than democratizing the country, realizing that the former is more important than the latter at the beginning of the independent state building.

My assumption is that one important omission of democracy promotion was the fact that it did not take into account (or equalized) the social, political and economic modernization of the countries that were targeted.

So, Why Would They Care?

On November 24, 2015 during his speech to the newly elected parliament, President Aliyev said:

“These elections demonstrated again that Azerbaijan is committed to democracy. In Azerbaijan all democratic institutions function successfully. All freedoms—freedom of speech, political freedoms, freedom of association, freedom of conscience and religion—are protected in the country. These elections proved once again that these freedoms exist here.”¹

The official newspaper Azerbaijan described in detail the positive reactions of several Israeli media outlets regarding the November elections in Azerbaijan. The newspaper also reported that “many international observers and foreign journalists have noted that elections in Azerbaijan by some parameters could be considered exemplary.” The newspaper quoted the personal observation of Vlad Zernitsky, the editor-in-chief of Radio Israel 1: “I observed voting in six polling stations. Everything was so fair and well-organized that it raised no questions.”²

The fundamental question for me is not whether these statements are right or wrong. The question that I struggle to understand is why it is important for the Azerbaijani state that the so-called international community recognizes elections. Why do they care?

First of all, my assumption is that since democracy has become a fashion of the 1990s, appearing demo-

1 Speech of President Ilham Aliyev at the first session of newly elected Milli Majlis, November 24, 2015, <<http://www.president.az/articles/16862>> (author’s translation).

2 “The elections in Azerbaijan are highly appreciated”, Azerbaijan Newspaper, November 19, 2015 <<http://www.azerbaijan-news.az/index.php?mod=3&id=83688>> (author’s translation).

cratic is important for the various newly independent countries as a form of affiliation with economically and politically advanced nations, mostly those of North America and Western Europe. Although the number of non-democratic countries is quite high around the world, the majority of them, if not all, claim to be a democracy and reject labels like “authoritarian” or “dictatorship”. Therefore, the conduct of elections in a single country puts it automatically into the “maybe democratic” category. This uncertainty is important as it creates a debate: a pre- and post-election debate on whether elections were free, fair, and democratic. However, it does not seriously damage the country if they were not. By merely conducting elections, the country already frames itself as democratic, since elections are possible only in a democracy.

Secondly, it seems that international legitimation is part of domestic persuasion and hegemony. This seems to be one of the strong reasons why the authorities in Azerbaijan are eager to have international observers for elections. The international stamp of approval is an important ritualistic act, which also stems from the ingrained mentality that everything local is of low quality; everything Western or European is much better. This is also a vestige of the Soviet system, when locally produced goods were always considered of a lower quality than the imported ones.

Repeated statements from state officials about the presence of numerous international observers from international organizations and foreign governments point to this tendency. Ali Hasanov, presidential aide, said 500 international observers came to observe the November 1 parliamentary elections. The OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) proposed 30 long-term observers to follow the election process countrywide, as well as 350 short-term observers to follow election day procedures, including voting, counting, and tabulation of results.³ At the same time, the presidential aide also said that the number of observers proposed by OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights was too high for a country the size of Azerbaijan.⁴ He referred to financial and accommodation problems related to the deployment of ODIHR observers, although observers are funded directly by participating states and not by the host government. Also, in the same interview, Hasanov made it clear that

it is not only the number but also the “biased” character of ODIHR observation that the government was unhappy about.

On September 11, OSCE ODIHR made a decision not to observe the November 1 Election in Azerbaijan. The ODIHR Director said: “The restriction on the number of observers taking part would make it impossible for the mission to carry out effective and credible election observation. Regretfully, we are compelled by these actions to cancel the deployment of ODIHR's observation mission for the parliamentary elections. The Azerbaijani authorities' insistence on a restricted number of observers is directly counter to the country's OSCE commitments and in contradiction to ODIHR's election observation mandate”.⁵

President Ilham Aliyev stated that ODIHR rudely violated its mandate by adopting the above-mentioned decision. Following up after the elections, presidential aide Ali Hasanov stated that since the EU accepts the results of the elections and is ready to work with the new parliament, the absence of the OSCE ODIHR mission cannot undermine the results of the elections⁶.

An interesting statement came from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In an interview to the APA Agency, a high-ranking Russian diplomat said that he was surprised by ODIHR's decision. He also noted that ODIHR's criteria of numbers of observers to be deployed are unclear: “They sent two observers to Germany and then wanted to send 600 to Kyrgyzstan”.⁷ In addition to that and in line with the geopolitical battle of rhetoric, Chairman of Russian Central Election Commission Vladimir Churov stated that: “The absence of one monitoring mission did not affect the results of the elections”⁸.

Conclusion

Echoing Fukuyama, Jurgen Habermas claimed that “while there have historically been many forms of legitimacy, in today's world the only serious source of legiti-

3 OSCE ODIHR, Azerbaijan Parliamentary Elections, Needs Assessment Mission Report, August 31, 2015, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/179216?download=true>>

4 “Enough observers arrived in Azerbaijan to monitor parliamentary elections, Presidential aide Ali Hasanov”, Azertac, November 1, 2015, <http://azertag.az/en/xeber/Enough_observers_arrived_in_Azerbaijan_to_monitor_parliamentary_elections_Presidential_Aide_Ali_Hasanov-897986>

5 “Restrictions imposed by Azerbaijan compel cancellation of parliamentary election observation mission, says ODIHR Director Link”, OSCE ODIHR Press Release, September 11, 2015, <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/181611>>

6 “Ali Hasanov: No ODIHR observers can cast doubt on the legitimacy of elections”, Contact.az, November 3, 2015, <<http://www.contact.az/docs/2015/Politics/110300135188en.htm#.VIRf6NZbw0Q>>

7 “Rusiya XİN: DTİHB-nin Azərbaycanca müşahidəçi göndərəkədən imtina etməsi çox təəccüblüdür” (Russian MFA: We are surprised to find out about ODIHR's refusal to send observers to Azerbaijan), APA, November 2, 2015, <<http://m.apa.az/?c=show&id=403396&l=az>>

8 “Churov: Parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan were democratic”, News.az, November 2, 2015, <<http://news.az/articles/commentary/102372>>

macy is democracy”⁹. Many would think it is a controversial statement, perhaps, as increasingly more nations today, in contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, slide back from democratic to authoritarian forms of government.

However, closer analysis of how national power elites behave in international and domestic environments reveals the inevitable tendency to succumb to the democratic form and discourse.

In a modern world of nations, it is important to appear democratic not only for the local audiences, but also to claim democratic legitimacy internationally. It even helps sometimes to “become a democracy” and gain enormous points globally, as in the case of Georgia.

Using the old Marxist terminology, we might perhaps claim that the form of democracy has become more important than the content. This sort of “commercialization of democracy”, as John Keane puts it, is becoming a norm of modern international and domestic politics.

Also, democratic legitimacy and the issue of recognition of “democraticness of election” becomes something valuable for the country “under recognition”. Bigger foreign actors with an interest in smaller countries play with the recognition issue and use it in order to gain more favors and gain more influence over the countries that need that democratic recognition.

About the Author

Rashad Shirinov is a PhD Researcher in Political Philosophy at Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

9 Habermas, Jürgen. “The Political” The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology”, in E. Mendieta and J. Vanantwerpen (eds.) *The Power of Religion in The Public Sphere* (New York, Columbia University Press 2011) p. 24 quoted in Bas Leijssenaar, Judith Martens & Evert van der Zweerde (eds.) *Futures of Democracy* (The Netherlands, Wilde Raven, 2014).

CHRONICLE

8 October – 27 November 2015

8 October 2015	Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian signs a decree setting 6 December 2015 as the date for a national referendum on the country's planned constitutional reform
8 October 2015	NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg says that Georgia is making progress on its path to NATO integration during a press conference following a meeting with Georgian Defense Minister Tina Khidasheli and Georgian Foreign Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Brussels
9 October 2015	Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Davit Dondua says that Georgia is not likely to be offered a NATO membership action plan (MAP) at the NATO's summit in Warsaw next year
10 October 2015	Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during an unannounced visit to Baku to discuss bilateral cooperation and regional security
11 October 2015	Georgian Energy Minister Kakha Kaladze says that Georgia will consider gas supplies from Russian gas company Gazprom to add to what the country is already receiving if the offer is commercially viable
12 October 2015	Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili congratulates Alexander Lukashenko on his re-election as President of Belarus, saying that he is confident that friendly relations between the two countries will further develop
13 October 2015	The chairman of the Azerbaijani Central Bank says at a parliamentary session that the country is considering a possible free floating exchange rate for the national currency, manat
14 October 2015	Data released by the National Bank of Georgia show that money transfers from abroad to the country in the first nine months of 2015 have declined by more than 26.7% year-on-year
16 October 2015	Leaders of the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), in which Armenia and Azerbaijan are members, sign a statement on combating international terrorism and an agreement on military cooperation at a summit in Kazakhstan
16 October 2015	Russian President Vladimir Putin says that the CIS member states could create a joint border force, citing the critical situation in Afghanistan
17 October 2015	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev dismisses National Security Minister Eldar Mahmudov, who served since 2004
19 October 2015	The leader of the breakaway region of South Ossetia, Leonid Tibilov, says that he plans to initiate steps for a referendum on joining the Russian Federation
20 October 2015	Seven officials with the National Security Ministry in Azerbaijan are arrested on charges of abuse of power following the dismissal of the National Security Minister
20 October 2015	Chief of the General Staff and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, General Viktor Muzhenko, visits Georgia and meets with Chief of the General Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces, Major General Vakhtang Kapanadze, in Tbilisi to discuss military cooperation between the two countries
21 October 2015	The head of the Georgian Rustavi 2 television channel, Nika Gvaramia, accuses the Georgian government of blackmailing and threatening him if he does not "step aside" from his position
24 October 2015	A Georgian leader of the opposition United National Movement (UNM) party, Giga Bokeria, is questioned by officials of the State Security Service in connection to an alleged "conspiracy to overthrow" the government
27 October 2015	Former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili speaks of the need to diversify gas supplies in Georgia through purchasing more gas from Russian state company Gazprom and increasing transit of Iranian gas
29 October 2015	Wired recordings emerge of two phone conversations by former Georgian President and current governor of the Odessa region, Mikheil Saakashvili, in which he discusses the need to "defend" the Rustavi 2 television channel through "physical confrontation"
30 October 2015	Rustavi 2 television channel head Nika Gvaramia says that he will no longer call for a rally of viewers in defense of the channel following the release of wired recordings of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili calling for defending Rustavi 2
1 November 2015	Ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) claims victory in the country's parliamentary elections which were boycotted by opposition parties

2 November 2015	Central Election Commission (CEC) chief Mazahir Panahov says that the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) has won the majority of votes in the parliamentary elections of 1 November in Azerbaijan with a voter turnout of under 56 percent
5 November 2015	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev meets with Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili during a visit in Tbilisi and pledges the “strategic partnership” and the further development of friendly relations between the two countries
6 November 2015	Nine civil society organizations in Georgia release a statement condemning the ruling of a Tbilisi court to replace the top management of the television channel Rustavi 2 as “unlawful”
10 November 2015	EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini praises Georgia’s “good work” in implementing the visa liberalization action plan during a visit to Tbilisi
12 November 2015	Human rights defender Arif Yunus is released from jail in Baku due to ill health, but is not allowed to leave the country
16 November 2015	The opposition United National Movement party (UNM) launches the start of a campaign to increase the monthly pension by 50 Georgian laris to 210 Georgian laris from next year
17 November 2015	Deputy Head of Georgia’s State Security Service, Levan Izoria, says that although Georgia is not on the list of countries with a high risk of terrorist attacks, threats are “treated seriously”
19 November 2015	Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin hails direct dialogue with Georgia following a meeting with the Georgian Prime Minister’s special representative for relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze, in Prague
20 November 2015	Protesters rally in the Armenian capital of Yerevan against constitutional changes that would transform the country into a parliamentary republic
22 November 2015	The Georgian State Security Service says they have arrested a Georgian man upon his return from Turkey on terrorism charges
24 November 2015	Access to at least two pro-Islamic State websites in Georgian language is blocked

Compiled by Lili Di Puppò

For the full chronicle since 2009 see <www.laender-analysen.de/cad>