

1. Summary

A well prepared mission, with good briefings / debriefings. Smooth and in general quiet E-day, even if there was a black-out when all ballots were on the table at the moment of counting them! Procedures were largely respected. If there were irregularities (vote purchasing was often verbally reported, but not verified in situ), they may have happened before or outside the polling stations. We were in fact surprised how well we were received everywhere, with no suspicion and even with people thanking us for visiting their polling station.

2. Prior to E-day

Upon arrival on 18 October at 4 am, we were smoothly dispatched from the airport to the hotels. The Hualing Hotel, a Chinese venture, were very convenient. Quite well prepared and instructive briefing at midday. Particularly interesting were the chapters on local politics, national minorities and media. Georgia is a country of particular complexity, due to its rich history, at the confluence of Hellenistic, Ottoman, Russian and Persian influences. Being located at such a cross-road, it hosts a number of ethnic minorities, having mainly flown in the mountainous areas. Finally, it went through difficult times when exiting the former USSR (both from a security and an economic standpoint), which does not impede Georgians to be proud of their nationality.

On the next morning, the briefing continued with practical recommendations on The E-day procedure, the way how to fill questionnaires and the use of the E-pen.

Then we went on 19 October in a specially organized bus for a six hours trip towards the Western part of the country. Georgia gently bends down from the rugged highlands near Tbilissi towards the semi-tropical plains near the Black Sea, this constituting a corridor between two chains of high mountains, the Armenian ones to the South and the Caucasus to the North. The bus made stopovers near Gori (Stalin's birthplace), Koutaissi (the former capital of Georgia) and Senaki, where our LTO's - Jehodit Orland and Peklar Vihervas - gave us a short regional briefing. Short, because it was already late. Finally our team (now completed: a German lady, a Georgian translator, the driver and me) proceeded to our final destination, Zugdidi.

On 20 October, we went to explore the area of observation which had been allocated to our team, in the countryside around Zugdidi. This provincial town is much poorer and less developed than Tbilissi. Its unemployment rate is as high as 60%. But many people try to combine there a remunerated activity with some autarky practices (a pig, a few chicken, ...). Situated near the independendist territory of Abkhazia, the town has been occupied in 2008 for a couple of days by the Russians troops. All of that is over, but one still perceives a certain sense of disillusion among the population. The same happens regarding the meaningfulness of the elections. Whatever the outcome, many believe that it would anyway not change much to their daily lives.

We visited as many polling stations as possible. Most of them were installed in schools, by the way in fairly deteriorated conditions. At least three quarter of the PEC members being present in the polling stations were women, many of them being teachers. This could potentially represent a slight problem regarding the necessary neutrality of the staff supervising the elections. How can they be independent, since they are paid by the government, which in turn is very close to the dominant party? Similarly, the president of another PEC was a professional dancer, whose salary was paid by that same municipality representing itself to the electors to be reconducted. Finally a gracious anecdote: a lady - member of one of the PECs where we went - proudly told us that she had a daughter living in Berlin, which had herself participated to an observation team during the last Bundestag elections!

3. The E-Day

On 21 October - the E-Day -, we went at 7 am to a first polling station without having announced us. All PEC members were present. They were wearing a sort of green blouse, as a distinctive sign. The PEC President gave them the necessary instructions. One could perceive a certain excitement, with quite a number of people speaking rather loudly and at the same time. But they all knew well what to do. And they also knew all each other very well, as it is often the case in such villages. The material was available on the spot, with nothing missing. All opening procedures were correctly respected. Everybody was ready and in place 15 minutes before the official opening.

We then randomly visited nine polling stations, changing locations so that nobody could predict where we would arrive. We spent in average 45 minutes per location. In one case, we even came a second time by surprise. In general, we did not see much anomalies to report. People were quiet and the procedures respected. It was even surprising how well we were received.

There is not a single place where we did not feel welcome. On the contrary, PEC members often thanked us for having chosen to visit them! They were overall smiling and friendly. However, the participation ratio was rather low. The reasons seems to be: a) disillusion, b) many people of the region were in the nearby region of Abkhazia, but there could not come back to vote. The only little incidents worth reporting are: on several locations, a camera was installed filming the ballot box (which was not in line with the established rule). We also noticed in front of one of the stations a gathering of buses. And even one of those buses arrived at the same time that a car with four uniformed police officers. A coincidence?

We assisted as from 8 pm in one of the polling station to the counting of the ballots. The procedures were correctly respected, even if sometimes slightly simplified. This did not mean a fraud. All PEC attendants were belonging to the same village and they knew each other so well that we could perceive a kind of mutual trust among them, even when they belonged to different parties.

More curious were the fact that, precisely when all ballots were on the table for counting, the light disappeared! However, within seconds a dozen of mobile telephones lighted up their torches. It is not possible to determine what exactly happened; but is unlikely that a substantial fraud could have taken place in such a short lapse of time.

We then accompanied a police car, which conveyed the ballots to the nearest TEC, in the center of Zugdudu. What a deployment of means (the PEC car, the police car and ours) for 300 ballots! No incident happened on the way.

When we arrived to the TEC, it was overcrowded, with many people and quite some agitation in front of their closed door. Another OSCE team was already inside. We therefore went to another TEC, half an hour away outside the town of Zugdudu. The ambiance there was much quieter and orderly. Each PEC team were entering one after the other, while the TEC officers registered their results accordingly. A large panel covering a whole wall of the room were filled one line after the other, with observers from all corners being able to watch the results in-progress. It went smoothly, in an disciplined and transparent manner. We left slightly after 3 am.

4. After the E-Day

We returned on 22 October to the TEC due to a complain deposited by a NGO: an elector had manage to deposit ballots both in a mobile voting box

and at a polling station. The facts had already been verified and confirmed by the TEC officers, which decided to open an investigation against the head of the concerned PEC. We then received the official manifest with the consolidated results of all regional votes.

After which we left to our base. The rest of the day (Sunday) was free and I took advantage of that time to visit Zugdidi castle, the city's traditional market (once again with very friendly people), an Orthodox Church and the gorgeous mountainous surroundings on the way up to Mestia. This country is full of natural and cultural treasures.

In the evening, all STOs met in Senaki with their respective LTOs for a lively debrief, followed by a convivial dinner. A walk through the town reinforced my feeling that people there deserve a chance to get a better life.

On 23 October, I requested (and was entitled) to return not with the bus, but alone by train. By the way, I am impressed by the quality, the comfort, the speed and the punctuality of the train in which I was. This also gave me the possibility to talk with the local population, which definitely is very open and friendly.

Once in Tbilisi, I paid a visit to the Swiss Ambassador, Mr. Lukas Beglinger. Very interesting exchange of views about the political situation in the country and the region. I share the view that a distinction must be done between the official rhetorics and the pragmatism with which the country develops. I shall try to push two cooperation files: a) Georgia could benefit a lot from the professional dual education system of Switzerland; and b) the Lausanne Hotel School could contribute to enhance the touristic potential of that gorgeous country.

I allowed myself one hour and a half to visit the center of Tbilisi, so full with History and charm. Then I took a taxi to the hotel, where I participated to the debriefing, once again fair, honest and instructive. The evening ended with a social and recreational event, during which I was once again impressed by the positive attitude and patriotism of some young Georgian (for example Kristina Arakelova, a member of the team), among so many others. That reception, with some cultural touches, continued fairly late, until the moment to move to the airport and fly back.

In short, the technical aspects of the election process seems to have gone fairly well in the region in which I was deployed. Of course, as many say, it is

not yet a democracy like ours. One cannot change overnight decades of strange habits. But one can legitimately be hopeful for the future.

I shall keep of Georgia the impression of a country with a very rich and complex History, deeply-rooted traditions and with a will to move forward to become a nation like and among others, with similar perspectives. It is currently looking towards Europe, perhaps more than to America, as a counter-weight to Russia, so near, so big and powerful. The path towards a true democracy and a real market economy will still require some time; but they are on the way. And it is important to accompany them on that path, as OSCE does it. Finally, Georgian people are very nice and they deserve our understanding and friendship.

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