

## **Main Features of Georgia's Founding Council Elections**

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### **Abstract**

The elections of Georgia's Democratic Republic founding council is a special event in the country's political history, which is characterized by a number of special features, in both: within the country and at international scale. Consequently, the study of the past experiences and rethinking the political processes are very important and relevant. After the announcement of independence of Georgia (26th May 1918), the government had realized the necessity of the founding council's elections. Therefore, the preparation of the election legislation began in the summer of 1918 and on November 22, the Parliament of Georgia had already approved the law – about "Regulations of the Founding Council Elections". In the article 119 the mentioned law was described every electoral issue and its regulations. In this process were involved almost all political subjects. It is important to highlight that by this regulation we can clearly see the democratic character of elections. According to the elections regulation, the elections would be held in proportional terms and there would be determined the rights of active and passive voters.

It is important to note that at that period in Georgian reality the new regulations were already implemented on 14, 15, 16 February, 1919. The Central Election Committee registered the list of 15 Candidates and granted the election numbers to 15 political subjects. There were nominated 600 candidates, out of which 26 were women, and five of them became members of the founding council (it is noteworthy to point out that in some of modern democratic countries, woman was granted the right to vote much later). During the pre-election period the important issues of modern political parties are - the problems of program documents with their pre- election promises. It should be noted that even in the times of the founding council almost all election subjects had presented the electoral platform. It seems that the current problems are almost intersected. They were developing future reforms: emphasize human rights, labor rights, the establishment of general democracy, development of a peaceful environment and an active involvement in

international cooperation. This is the reason of maintaining the importance of century long issues in modern society.

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**Keywords:** Independence, Elections, Rights, Legislation, Minorities, Democracy.

### **Introduction**

In the collective memory of the Georgian people, 26 May 19018 is an important event. Exactly in this day Georgia announced its independence. It is the first political step towards humanity after the country's whole century long colonial regime. Consequently, discussion of this issue and re-thinking the events does not lose its importance, especially when the Democratic Republic of Georgia was the first state in the world, which had elected the Social-Democratic Party.

The study of the issue, is based on the analysis of the historical-comparative method of empirical material, here we have to highlight that it gained a great significance by the time being.

The paper deals with the current political situation in Georgia, it is focused on the main processes, which in order to be actively engaged in international cooperation straight after declaring its independence, was directly depended on the development of democracy.

The main research questions of the paper is - at the time of the constituent assembly elections, whether this topical issue is modern and timely or not, and its importance in the international level.

### **To the Origin of Georgia's Independent State**

On 26 May 1918, the National Council convened at the Government Palace Hall and at the enlarged session declared the state independence of Georgia. The historical council's session was attended by 42 members and 36 candidates.

The Independence Act of Georgia says – “For many centuries Georgia existed as an independent and free state. By the end of the eighteenth century, the country, which was surrounded by enemies from its all sides, decides to join Russia, and Russia from its side gave the permission to defend Georgia from its enemies”<sup>2</sup>.

In the independence act of the first Social Democratic Republic of the world, is shown the power of government representatives, recognition and respect for democratic values. All the seven Articles of the Acts were directed towards the peaceful coexistence of the Democratic Republic, especially, the

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<sup>2</sup> There is an opinion that the National Council has created a precondition for diplomatic cooperation with this statement

following three: the fifth, sixth and seventh articles were directly related to the national minority: "The democratic republic of Georgia guarantees equality of civil and political rights for all citizens regardless of nationality and gender; the Democratic Republic of Georgia will open free environment for the development of all the inhabitants on its territory; prior to the meeting of the founding council, the management of the whole governments - the Board of Governors is headed by the National Council, which will be completed by the representatives of national minorities, and the temporary government is responsible for the Council" [1].

On May 26, 1918, after the announcement of independence of Georgia, the National Council approved its first government, which was consisted of representatives of various parties,<sup>3</sup> the government of the coalition was completed by the Social Democrats (4 members), National-Democrats (1 member), Socialist-Federalist (2 members) and (Socialist-Revolutionists) (1 member). However, we have to say that the social democrats were in majority.

Later, by the resolution of October 8, 1918 the National Council of Georgia was named the Parliament of Georgia.

Sovereign Georgia's government had planned to build a national state only based on democratic values and principles. The democratic principles, including the arrangement and development of the state, was agreed and supported by the absolute majority of that time Georgian political elite.

### **Regulation of the Constituent Assembly Elections**

Upon the announcement of independence of Georgia there raised the question about the formation of the founding council. Especially, the seventh Article of Independence Act says: "Prior to the founding council meeting, the governance of the whole Georgia is headed by the National Council", [2] which itself meant that the National Council and the Parliament of Georgia were considered as temporary organs.

The authorities had clearly and correctly understood the issue and sense of coming into power through the legitimate elections of the legislative body, and consequently the need for the founding council elections (parliament). In addition, the elections were a major challenge for the newly created democratic state.

By forming the constituent assembly, the population was able to express its opinion, whether it was justified by the political parties' or not, to prove or reject the independence of Georgia. "We are addressing to the people and we want them to say whether our step was correct or not, they have founded what we declared, it means that they gave it the basis and

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3 Except for Bolsheviks. Representatives of the National Council also had ethnic minorities residing in Georgia.

determination, and confirm the act of independence, which was published on May 26th", says the newspaper "Unity" [3,209].

The preparation for the electoral legislation began in the summer of 1918 and on November 22, the Parliament already approved the law consisting of 10 chapters and 119 articles - "Regulation of the Constituent Assembly Elections", as well as it approved the total sum needed for the assembly. The government was ordered to provide 4 million "Maneti" (Georgian currency of that time) for the constituent assembly elections. [4]. On January 10, the Parliament adopted the Law about the "Appointment of the Founding Assembly Elections", which declares the date of the founding council elections - 14-16 February 1919.

Within the scope of our research, the study of primary sources (press materials, archive documents), show us how the Social-Democrats and opposition parties were preparing for upcoming elections. The first chapter of the Regulation begins with the statement of democratic content: "The founding council is completed according to the rule of proportional representations, by the members of the elected country's residents, regardless the gender, - by equal, straightforward and secret voting". It is important that, if we consider this provision by the features of Robert Daly's modern democracy, and at the same time analyze country's current political situation, we can see that the accepted reality is presented by a number of Daly's parameters. Especially, the freedom to create organizations and easily join them; right to participate in elections; right to be elected to the public and / or state position; the right of political leaders to fight for public support and voters; conduct free and fair elections; state institutions should depend on voting results or other forms of public support expressions; the existence of alternatives information sources [5];

We would like to emphasize the few most important articles of the regulations, which do not lose its significance even the centuries later. Especially, the rights for both sexes participation in the elections, the process of elections which was entrusted to the Republic's central, city, rural, rural community and village election committee. Here, we have to point out that in the above mentioned regulations there are certain notes of indications about the Sokhumi election constituency, which is currently occupied by Russia, and as well as the Zakatala constituency, which since the creation of the Soviet Union are no longer the parts of Georgia.

According to the democratic principles, in the multiparty system of Article 10-11 (Chapter 3), the election committee was consisted of 21 members and elected by the Parliament.<sup>4</sup> The committee itself chose the

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<sup>4</sup> The Election Commission of the Republic was responsible for the management of the entire election process of the founding council (11 sub-paragraphs).

chairperson, deputy chairman, secretary and treasurer. The committee was completed by one representative from a political party nominated by a candidate.

The chairman of the election committee was a member of Social-Democrat party, Aleksandre Lomtadze.

It is necessary to highlight that the most sensitive problem of modernity is respecting the freedom and accuracy of elections (Chapter 9, Article 93-114). These articles are about the agitation materials, the posters, the damage of lists with candidates' names, the spread of candidates' fake information and their discrimination. In this case one will be imposed the administrative punishment, can be fined or sentenced from 1 to 6 months prison (according to the severity of the crime). Ministry of Internal Affairs released an order concerning to administrative staff about the interference in campaign in favor of any political subject [6,104].

The provisions of the Parliamentary Elections, which were adopted by the multiparty Parliament, practically included almost all progressive views of the given period, gender equality for voter rights regulations and for elections barriers campaigns.

### **The Main Features of the Election of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia**

Due to a number of moments, the elections of the Georgian Constituent Assembly, which took place a century ago, even nowadays have a great importance in the international community. The process of elections was genuinely democratic. The state published a number of calls in the press and media, and in the days prior to the elections it addressed to the population: "14, 15 and 16 February are the elections of the constituent assembly of Georgia! My fellow citizens! Today we decide Georgia's destiny! You have to do it yourself! One of the biggest enemies of Georgia will be the indifference towards the elections! In this fatal moment, when Georgia is surrounded by numerous enemies and faces a threat to the distraction, citizens of Georgia, you must give them the right answer! You have to fight based on the necessity - if there is needed gun, with gun, and if word, with word. In the elections of the constituent assembly you have to express your firm will and be ready to defend country's independence and develop it according to the democratic structures and values. Do not forget even for a while that the elections of the founding council are a great phenomenon in our nation's lives! No one should stay at home during the election days! Everyone has to go to the ballot boxes! Do not lose your voice! "[7].

15 political organizations fought for 130 seats. The high quality of democratic elections in the country was expressed by the "diversity" of

political parties. Particularly, in the participation in the elections the ethnic minority parties together with the Georgians.<sup>5</sup>

Georgian electoral legislation imposed interesting, somehow protected, flexible electoral barrier, so called “election meter”.

It is important that the pre-election programs presented by political subjects and published using the help of their own press, actually defined the direction of their views. Political parties explain the importance of the elections to citizens, which was expressed in pre-elections calls.<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted that in the founding council’s elections, out of 130 Social-Democrats nominees 6 women were not Georgian by ethnicity<sup>7</sup>[8]. According to the statute, the voter in the elections of the constituent assembly had just to circle the name of one of the (party’s) listed candidates.<sup>8</sup>

The founding council had a multiparty system. In the elections, the Social Democratic Party had 109 mandates (5 of them were women). Out of 8 mandates, National-Democratic and Socialist-Federalist parties got – 8. As for the Socialist Revolutionaries – they got 5. We have to highlight that apart from Georgians, almost all the national minorities living in Georgia were elected as deputies.

It is true that, the final result of the founding council’s elections was in the favor of only one political party which became full dominant, but all the political parties were ready for cooperation and this process gave a significant impact to the existed at that time opposition parties. In the founding council, out of 6 major positions 3 were occupied by opposition candidates. The representatives of opposition parties had taken the post of the main commission chairman [9].

The archival documents note that the founding council of Georgia is elected by direct, equal, universal, secret and proportionate electoral system of both sexes. At its first meeting on March 12, 1919, the country and history confessed that it accepted and agreed the Act of Georgian Independence approved by the National Council on 26 May 1918 [10].

The government of the country had 3 branches of power, and the political system was based on pluralism and multiparty policy. Citizens' rights

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5 №1 Georgian Socialist Labor Party (GSLP), №2 Georgian National Democratic Party (GNDP), №3 Georgian Socialist Revolutionary Party (GSRP), №4 Armenian Revolutionary Party "Dashnaktutuni", №5 The Socialist-Federalist Party of Georgia (SFPG), №6 The National Council of Muslims (Azerbaijanis Group), №7 Radical-democratic peasant party, №8 The nationalist (national) party, №9 The left-wing , Socialist federal party, N10 Shota Rustaveli Group, № 11 "Union of Non-Parties", №12 List of Muslims of Borchalo Mazz (Azeri Group), №13 Russia Social-Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP), №14"The League of Esthetic Patriots ", №15 Elinos (Greek) Democratic Party.

6 In the founding council, the number of applicants was about 600, including 26 women.

7 Five women (Social Democrats) were elected as members of the founding council.

8 The lists should be submitted no later than thirty days prior to the election.

based on democratic principles have been developed by the greatest empowerment of the founding council and approved by the adopted constitution, which was worked out and studied on the experience of Western countries. Although, this constitution worked just for a few days, it is still very significant for the Georgian reality, because it shows the Georgian high level political history and the democratic character of the state.

European leaders recognized the independence of Georgia's democratic republic. However, it lasted only for three years, as the occupation of Soviet Russia bring to the end of the existence of democratic country. Despite its short lifespan, the country had a number of significant achievements.

### **Conclusion**

On May 26, 2018, the announcement of the state independence of Georgia appeared on the world political map – which was the birth of the world's first social democratic state, with its unique democratic elections history.

Due to the multi nationality of the country, the Government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia chose a tolerant course towards national minorities. Already a century ago, they intended to grant national minorities the possibility of harmonious coexistence with the Georgians, free social, economic and cultural development.

Despite the fact that the democratic Republic of Georgia, was considered as the former periphery of the Russian Empire for centuries, however, it could manage to hold the general universal elections earlier than many developed countries, where both sexes were granted the right to vote in the elections actively or and passively; 5 women were represented in the legislative body; the government had a multiparty system from its very beginning. However, the majority was the representatives of social democrats; but there were established the state institutions; the constitution was adopted; there was developed the legislation to protect national and religious minorities in the country; women were granted the rights to vote; was created a good example of multiparty system governance; and last but not least there were developed a culture of political opinion and debate.

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