

Georgian Azerbaijanis and their Political Participation

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Introduction

When looking into the demographics of Georgia, the first thing that comes into attention is the country's multiethnic profile. According to the latest population census¹, Georgia's total population amounts to more than 3.7 million people, of which 86.8% are ethnic Georgians. Meanwhile, the country harbors many ethnic minorities such as Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Russians, Ossetians, Yazidi Kurds, etc. According to the statistics, ethnic Azerbaijanis are the biggest ethnic minority, making up 6.3% of the population, followed by ethnic Armenians with 4.5%. The Azerbaijani minority is mainly concentrated in the regions of Kvemo-Kartli and Kakheti, with small segments also residing in Central Tbilisi. Interestingly, Azerbaijanis mainly live in rural areas, with nearly 200.000 people inhabiting the countryside. We can assume that urban-rural divide affects the political participation directly, accompanied by the knowledge of Georgian language.

While participation of ethnic minorities in Georgia's political processes has always been a topic of discussion, after the recent parliamentary elections in Georgia - which took place in October 2024 - the electoral results and the election polls themselves brought a lot of controversy in ethnic minority regions. Before delving into the results, it is worth looking into pre-election processes and why these elections were considered a pivotal moment in Georgia's history. Georgian Dream, Georgia's current ruling party, came to power after the 2012 parliamentary elections, when it won over Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement. Back then, Georgian Dream promised to keep on European integration processes and pursue somewhat liberal, even leftist policies. This culminated in Georgia being granted EU candidate status in December 2023². However, while on the one hand the negotiations for the EU accession were taking place, on the other hand Georgian Dream was gradually shifting its policies in a way that contradicts the Western alignment strategy. The main object of discussion is the controversial "the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" sometimes called "Foreign Agents Law", which the Georgian Dream government adopted amid mass protests and sharp opposition.

This law demanded that all NGOs operating in the country must show their revenue to the government, and if they receive more than 20% of their income from foreign sources, they must be registered as foreign agents. These events, which took place during the spring of 2024, resulted in high polarization during the October 2024 parliamentary elections. The two major factions were represented by the Georgian Dream and by a coalition of four opposition parties, the latter supported by the President Salome Zourabichvili. Prior to the elections, there was a widespread belief that Georgian Dream was not going to win, with fewer people attending the party's campaign rallies³ - the ones attending were mainly public servants and elderly people brought by buses funded by the ruling party. Meanwhile, opposition rallies attracted people from all spheres, leading to assumptions of high chances of winning the elections. However,

¹ 2014 population census of Georgia / National statistics office of Georgia

² [European Council conclusions on Ukraine, enlargement and reforms](#)

³ [Georgian election: Ivanishvili holds mass rally before crucial vote](#)

Georgian Dream ended up securing its fourth term in office with 53.92% of voting preferences, thus receiving 89 seats in the parliament⁴.

During elections and post-election period, claims of election fraud and manipulation of the votes were made by the opposition and the ODIHR⁵ (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights), with the President appealing to the Constitutional Court of Georgia to annul the votes and call for re-election. It is noteworthy that cases of election fraud were observed primarily in ethnic minority regions, where Georgian Dream won by a landslide having secured more than 70% of the votes⁶. In a notable case, a Georgian-Azerbaijani citizen and member of Marneuli city council was witnessed stuffing the ballots to the box, which led to the suspension of the voting process in that station⁷. After the results, widespread unrest ensued, with some people accusing minorities of distorting the country's European future. Moreover, the longstanding cliché of ethnic minorities always supporting the ruling party resurfaced, as in the past elections minorities mostly voted for the incumbent party.

This report will revolve around the Georgian-Azerbaijani community, investigating their current situation, their troubles, political activism and election behaviours concurrently as well as the different approach of several political parties to ethnic minorities in Georgia, with a focus on the Azerbaijani minority. Additionally, a comparison of different election results in ethnic minority regions will be provided.

Modern history of Georgian-Azerbaijanis

Ethnic minorities have been a part of Georgian statehood since the foundation of the first republic. Although the first republics in South Caucasus were formed during the years of 1918-1920, the nation part of the concept “nation-state” was mainly formulated during the soviet era. Remarkably, in the parliament of the Democratic Republic of Georgia an Azerbaijani woman named Parikhan Sofiyeva was elected. There are claims that this is the first case of a Muslim Turk woman being elected as MP⁸ anywhere in the world. Until 1936, ethnic Azerbaijanis were known as “Tatars” or “Borchali Turks”- it was after the adoption of the Stalin constitution in 1936 and the creation of union subjects according to dominant ethnicities that the local Muslim Turk minorities were labeled “Georgian Azerbaijanis”. The Soviet Union consisted of 15 republics, each based on the dominant ethnic group of the given state and comprising other ethnic minorities in some cases. In the light of this, in order to understand the current situation and problems ethnic minorities face in Georgia it is necessary to analyse policies implemented during Soviet times. A major tendency observed was for ethnic minorities to migrate to their kin states - Georgian Azerbaijanis migrate to Azerbaijan and Georgian Armenians migrate to Armenia. These migrations took place continuously, as many individuals moved out to their

⁴ https://results.cec.gov.ge/#/en-us/election_57/tr/dashboard

⁵ https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/6/584029_0.pdf

⁶ [Official Results of 2024 Vote: What They Show – Civil Georgia](#)

⁷ [Court in Georgia rules that two men accused of ballot stuffing be held, Interpress reports | Reuters](#)

⁸ [The world's first democratically elected Muslim woman was from Georgia | Eurasianet](#)

home countries to get higher education in their own language and work in better jobs. However, migrations intensified during the dissolution of the Soviet Union as people felt threatened with ethnic tensions rising.

The root of this issue lies in the education policy of the Soviet Union and union subjects. Inside the Georgian SSR, ethnic minorities had the right to obtain education in their own languages. But in practice, this policy was not applied to higher education institutions. This resulted in most citizens being incapable of pursuing higher education in their home republic, and those who wanted to attend university would do it either in their kin states or in other Soviet Republics in Russian. A key element of national identity building is the existence of higher educated elites who create ideals which form a nation. With this policy, ethnic minorities, mainly Azerbaijanis were left without their intellectual elite. This constant state of internal “brain drain” continued inside Soviet Georgia until 1988. With the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the waves of ethnic nationalism in Soviet Republics began to rise.

In Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the son of a nationalist poet, former dissident and a prominent nationalist ideologue, became the country’s first President. He put forward the slogan “Georgia for Georgians”, which incited unrest throughout the country. In the north a conflict with Abkhazia began, but in the south Azerbaijanis and Armenians migrated en masse to their kin states⁹. Sometimes even violence ensued, as there are cases where self-defence battalions were organized by the local population¹⁰. In 1987, after the Svaneti avalanches, most of the local Svan population was displaced. The Georgian Government tried to resettle them in Dmanisi, which is an ethnically Azerbaijani majority region. This resulted in widespread clashes in 1989. Echoes of this confrontation were heard even in 2021¹¹, when two communities violently clashed because some Svans robbed a store belonging to a Georgian Azerbaijani man.

But after the ousting of nationalist President Gamsakhurdia, the situation began to de-escalate. With both Azerbaijan and Georgia reverting their nationalistic policies, the days of open discrimination towards minorities were over. However, according to the locals, discrimination towards minorities was not fully diminished- it had just got a latent form. During the tenure of Eduard Shevardnadze, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of USSR and second president of Georgia, legislature and governance began to take shape. Institutions handling minority issues like the Special Human Rights Service under the State Council and the Human Rights Council were created.

After the Rose Revolution, which deposed Eduard Shevardnadze’s government and brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power, the latter took more of a proactive stance towards minorities, choosing to establish governance in a more decentralized manner. From the outlook of nationalism studies, Saakashvili’s term was characterized by civic nationalism replacing ethnic

⁹ These transformative processes had a profound impact on Georgia’s national minorities, and while according to the last Soviet census conducted in 1989, 28% of the country’s population was made up of persons belonging to national minorities, this figure had dropped to 16% by 2002.

¹⁰ [Discrimination against Azerbaijanis in Georgia – Aze.Media](#)

¹¹ <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/420142>

nationalism. Civic nationalism implies that all citizens of a country are considered part of the same nation. Theoretically, Georgian nationalism is based on the ideals of Ilia Chavchavadze, who coined the “fatherland-language-faith” triad as the basis of Georgian nationhood with faith being the Orthodox Christianity, but, according to some sources¹², even Chavchavadze himself, upon a better acquaintance with the Muslim community in Georgia changed the triad to “fatherland-language-history”. Apparently, during Saakashvili's tenure, the emphasis was made on the second option- “fatherland- language-history”, as imposing Christianity as the foundation of the nationhood could marginalize Muslim population of Georgia. At the same time, the country's flag changed into the one with crosses on it, which angered the Muslim minorities of the country. It is also worth mentioning that during the rule of Saakashvili the body of Gamsakhurdia was returned to Georgia. This period also cemented the Georgian language as the basis of nationalism, which put minorities into a dire situation. But generally, positive developments towards ethnic minorities outweighed negative ones during the United National Movement (UNM)'s¹³ rule.

One of the local interviewees claimed that years 2007-2013 were the best times for both Georgians and ethnic minorities. Indeed, in this time frame the Law on general education, which gave the right to minorities to obtain education in their own language, was adopted.¹⁴ Moreover, Georgia signed the Framework Convention on National Minorities (FCNM), which came into force in 2006. Additionally, the milestone 1+4 program was confirmed in 2010 during the rule of Saakashvili. “1+4” gives a chance for students from ethnic minorities to obtain higher education in Georgia universities based on the outcomes of a general exam in their own language, after which they have to enroll in a one-year foundation course in the Georgian language provided by the university. This program has created a new generation of young professionals, which will be further discussed over the report.

In 2012, UNM was defeated by Georgian Dream in parliamentary elections. During the rule of Georgian Dream, efforts towards integration of ethnic minorities increased. Georgian Dream's policy towards ethnic minorities is reflected in such documents¹⁵ as “2009-2014 National Concept of Tolerance and Civil Integration”, “2015-2020 State Strategy for Civil Equality and Integration” and “State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration 2021-2030”. In the last document, the following five main strategic priorities are mentioned: 1) Support to education in the state language; 2) Access to quality education; 3) Equality, civic and political participation; 4) Social and economic integration; and 5) Intercultural dialogue. The implementation of these strategies is done by the State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, which was created in 2008. Overall, some positive changes were observed during the Georgian Dream tenure. For example, the number of minority members in municipal

¹² <https://www.marneulifm.ge/az/verilishler/seslifikirler/article/84163-dil>

¹³ UNM (United National Movement)- is a political party in Georgia, founded by Mikheil Saakashvili. It was the ruling party between 2003 and 2012.

¹⁴ Article 4.3. The citizens of Georgia, whose native language is not Georgian, shall have the right to acquire a complete general education in their native language in accordance with the National Curriculum, as provided for by the legislation.

¹⁵ More about documents: http://idfi.ge/en/assessment_of_political_engagement_of_ethnic_minorities

organizations and in the parliament increased. In 2017 for the first time in modern history of Georgia, Temur Abazov, an ethnic minority representative, was selected as mayor of Marneuli. In 2019, his deputy, Zaur Darghalli - now a Georgian Dream MP- was appointed mayor, followed by another Azerbaijani, Kanan Omarov. It is also worth mentioning that, in 2019, the Marneuli Municipality made its first post in the Azerbaijani language. However, this was not a gesture of goodwill, but rather the result of an 11-day social media campaign by the local civil society.

The number of students enrolled in the 1+4 program has been increasing¹⁶ annually. But the main problem with this program is that it only gave free education to 100 persons for Azerbaijani and Armenian community, which is disproportionately low considering the number of applications. Moreover, offering the same number of scholarships for both Armenian and Azerbaijani population causes disbalance between minorities, as demographically ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia prevail over ethnic Armenians. SOCAR Georgia (State Oil Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan) also offers scholarships for Azerbaijani minorities. This also sparks dissent, with some citizens questioning why Azerbaijan should fund the education of Georgian citizens. We can assume that Georgian Dream tries to keep the status quo with some little advancements in the integration of ethnic minorities. The primary reason for this is that, by keeping them vulnerable, they can get a substantial amount of votes in the elections, which is what happened at the latest elections.

To summarize, the Georgian-Azerbaijanis have lived through the Soviet and post-Soviet times as Georgian citizens, with little or no separatist tendencies. However, successive governments in Tbilisi have made only minimal efforts to integrate them into society and political life. Incumbent political parties have tried and still do use their vulnerability to gain votes, sometimes even getting help from Azerbaijani government. Indeed, in recent elections they received widespread support from Azerbaijani media¹⁷, and in the past elections Azerbaijani officials swayed local people to vote for the candidate of Georgian Dream.¹⁸ Yet, a new educated elite of the minorities is forming nowadays, sharing the same aspirations as the Georgian youth.

There are several stereotypes that Georgians have formed against Azerbaijani minority. One of them involves viewing the minority as backward and as having illegitimately settled on their land. This outlook is shared mostly by Georgian nationalists. Moreover, Georgians mock Azerbaijanis for not knowing the state language. For example, when ethnic Azerbaijanis make mistakes while speaking Georgian, they often find themselves getting ridiculed by the ethnic Georgians.¹⁹ Another example is related to the rate of early marriages, on which statistically²⁰ Kvemo-Kartli, a region mostly inhabited by the ethnic minorities, stands first, with 25% of

¹⁶ <https://komentari.ge/en/article/the-1-4-program-for-ethnic-minorities-what-should-we-know/>

¹⁷ [How Azerbaijani media and politicians endorse Georgia's shift away from the West - DFRLab](#)

¹⁸ [Georgians allege Azerbaijan interfering in their local elections | Eurasianet](#)

¹⁹ Language hierarchies in Georgia: an experimental approach/ Jesse Driscolla, Christofer Berglundb, Timothy Blauvelt/ 2016

²⁰ https://www.unicef.org/georgia/sites/unicef.org.georgia/files/2019-11/child_marriage_en.pdf

early marriages happening in Georgia. The case of Aytac's murder²¹ caused significant controversy among Georgian society. Another stereotype is based on elections, as Georgians think that ethnic minorities always voting for the incumbent party is negative for Georgia's political institutions. Additional information about voting practices of ethnic Azerbaijanis will be given in the following part of this article.

Election strategies of major parties in the latest election

Election strategy of Georgian Dream

Georgian Dream's emergence into the political arena was accompanied by the fall of the United National Movement (UNM). Georgian Dream was founded in 2012 by Georgia's richest person, the Russian-based oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili²². Launched in April 2012, they formed a coalition with several like-minded parties and successfully overthrew the incumbent UNM in the parliamentary elections which took place in October of the same year. During their first years in power, their agenda was based on EU integration and improving the country's economic situation. Georgian Dream participated in the 2012 elections as part of a broad coalition that included parties formed by politicians previously affiliated with Saakashvili. Their presence was intended to reassure Western governments and the Georgian public that there would be no fundamental shift in the country's development path. In the first Georgian Dream government, Irakli Alasania, who had served as an ambassador to the UN under Saakashvili, was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister. Bidzina Ivanishvili became Prime Minister and held the position for a year. He stepped down after Saakashvili's term ended (President Saakashvili left the country), and following that, the presidential election was won by the Georgian Dream nominee Giorgi Margvelashvili. In 2014, the party triumphed in local elections, consolidating its hold on power, and the coalition began to disintegrate. Georgian Dream's dominance on the Georgian political scene was further confirmed in the 2016 parliamentary elections. This time, the party ran independently and won 115 out of 150 seats in parliament, securing a constitutional majority.²³ Until the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, the main difference between these parties was on domestic issues, mainly on the governance of the economy, with GD having a statist stance and the UNM having a more liberal stance²⁴. After the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, GD started to move to the right wing of the political spectrum. The party became more conservative, and started to use the discourse of "war and peace" on their agenda more often. "War and peace" discourse is based on fear-mongering tactics which Georgian Dream utilizes claiming that the opposition will drag Georgia into war with Russia. To see a clear pattern, here is a comparison between the election promises of the GD in 2020 and 2024 parliamentary elections.

²¹ <https://jam-news.net/child-marriage-in-georgia/>

²² More about Ivanishvili: <https://transparency.ge/en/post/oligarch-bidzina-ivanishvili-real-ruler-georgia-and-architect-georgias-pro-russian-shift>

²³ [A Journey into a glorious past: three terms of Georgian Dream/ Wojciech Górecki](#)

²⁴ [Kakhishvili L, Keshelava D., 2021. Georgia. Political Landscape of Georgia](#)

Table 1. The pre-election promises of Georgian Dream for 2020 vs 2024

Pre-election promises of Georgian Dream 2020	Pre-election promises of Georgian Dream 2024
200 000 new jobs	Abolition of opposition parties (of the so-called "collective National Movement")
40% growth in the economy	Adoption of homophobic legislation ("On Family Values and Protection of Minors")
EU membership application by 2024	Readiness to restore territorial integrity
	Proclaiming Orthodox Christianity as the state religion (an agreement could not be reached and the issue was corrected)

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It can be clearly observed that the Georgian Dream has set goals which use intimidatory language and sidelined domestic economic issues in the latest election promises. The Dream's posters and slogans in the latest election reveal a picture of abuse of the national security discourse. For example, in one of the billboards²⁶ Georgian Dream showed the war torn Ukraine on one side of the poster and stable Tbilisi on the other. One of the most popular issues on the GD agenda is the "Global War Party" conspiracy theory, which presumes that western powers and opposition parties would force Georgia to go to war with Russia, playing down on the traumas of the 2008 war. They also mention the importance of conservative values, even going as far as depicting opposition under a rainbow, making them seem like staunch LGBTQ+ supporters.

Georgian Dream also uses biased strategies in their election propaganda. Georgian Dream appealed to what is commonly called salience bias, when individuals prioritise and make decisions based on some factors or aspects of an event that stand out, rather than focusing on the bigger picture. Georgian Dream's campaign know-how also benefited from the public's tendency towards authority bias or their preference for the statements of those in power. Since 2012, the ruling party has won every election held in Georgia and reaped the electoral benefits of incumbency to the fullest. In the case of Zourabichvili's 2018 candidacy, it delivered nearly 60% of second-round votes, and ultimately the presidency. The 2018 election campaign also illustrated Georgian Dream's heavy reliance on negative memory bias in their campaign messaging, which assumes that unpleasant memories are more easily recalled and have disproportionate influence in public decision making. For the Georgian Dream, the spectre of UNM's "Bloody Nine Years" has long been fodder for political appeals to this bias, as the suppression of protests and sustained human rights concerns during the Mikheil Saakashvili era continue to be a painful memory for many Georgians. Pro-Georgian Dream advertisements

²⁵ <https://gip.ge/publication-post/from-elections-to-elections-transformation-of-the-georgian-ruling-political-party-georgian-dream/> Table 1.

²⁶ ['Georgian Dream' campaign posters: symbols of a polarising election - The New Federalist](#)

rarely miss an opportunity to reinforce this negative memory and its association with UNM, while subtly including new attacks against other opposition forces.²⁷

Georgian Dream has a unique outlook for gaining votes from the minority groups. First is that they also use the ethnic card for gaining votes. Currently, there are 2 MPs from Azerbaijani minority, Zaur Darghalli (former mayor of Marneuli) and Savalan Mirzoev from Gardabani. Georgian Dream uses them as figureheads of their election campaign in ethnic minority regions using vast resources that they have to organize meetings in every village. One of the interviewees claimed that in the recent elections, Georgian Dream was the most active party in the minority regions. One person even said that “I vote for 41²⁸ because I know Zaur, I don't know the others”.

Election strategy of the opposition

UNM-Unity

United National Movement is one of the main oppositionary political parties in Georgia. It is widely known as the party of Mikheil Saakashvili. The party still has him as the Honorary Chairman of the party despite him being in prison. While at first the party was considered center-left, nowadays they use more of a center-right discourse. Here it is useful to remind that nearly all of the opposition parties signed the “Georgian Charter²⁹”, a document proposed by the President Salome Zourabishvili where signatories of the charter agreed that, if they win the elections, a multiparty coalition would be formed under a technocratic guise aiming to join the EU as fast as possible. Going into elections, United National Movement formed a coalition with like-minded parties of Strategy Aghmashenebeli and European Georgia. In the pre-election period, the party pursued a liberal conservative approach to its campaign, and mainly differ from the Georgian Dream on economic matters. UNM mostly pursues a liberal economic policy different from the Keynesian approach of the Georgian Dream.

UNM's primary election promise consisted in the abolition of the so-called “Russian law”. Secondly, they promised to increase wages and create more jobs for the people, claiming that currently the country's economy works for the elites. Thirdly, they focused on the elderly people, promising to increase pensions and reduce the price of medications. Following that, they mentioned that they will strengthen the families by creating chances for both young and the elderly. Finally, they claimed that they will take down the “price mafia”³⁰ of Ivanishvili³¹. Overall, UNM didn't have any direct answer to the discourse of “war and peace”, their main focus was on economy and European integration.

²⁷ [The might of Georgian Dream's election visuals/ Anastasia Tsalugelashvil](#)

²⁸ In Georgia, every political party has a specific designated ballot number to them, for instance Georgian Dream's number is 41, United National Movement's number is 5.

²⁹ <https://jam-news.net/what-is-georgian-charter-2/>

³⁰ Opposition parties assume that all of the major businesses of Georgia are controlled by Ivanishvili and his associates, thereby resulting in monopoly in the Georgian market.

³¹ <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/133197-unity-national-movement-presented-5-election-priorities/>

This table illustrates the main differences between UNM and GD³²:

Table 5.6
Policy issues from the conservative-liberal dimension on which GD and UNM have opposing views

Policy issue	Policy area	Party positions	
		GD	UNM
All students in high school should receive sex education	Healthcare and Education	Disagree	Strongly agree
Education about Orthodox Christianity should be compulsory in all high schools	Healthcare and Education	Agree	Strongly disagree
To make the judicial system more independent, local judges should be replaced by foreign judges	Judiciary	Disagree	Strongly agree
Judges should be elected by the people	Judiciary	Disagree	Agree
Soft drugs should be legalized	Judiciary	Strongly disagree	Agree
Mandatory military service should be abolished	Foreign Policy and Security	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
Selling land to foreigners should be banned	Social and Environmental Issues	Agree	Strongly disagree
Religious institutions, including the Orthodox Church, should not receive state funding	Social and Environmental Issues	Strongly disagree	Agree
In areas populated with ethnic minorities, it should be allowed to receive state services in their own languages	Social and Environmental Issues	Agree	Disagree
To reduce carbon emissions, old cars should be banned	Social and Environmental Issues	Agree	Strongly disagree
Companies responsible for environmental pollution should pay additional taxes	Social and Environmental Issues	Agree	Disagree

Source: Election Compass Georgia

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Relations between UNM and Georgian Azerbaijanis had been quite positive until recent years. The first reason is Saakashvili's cult of personality among Georgian citizens- specifically, Azerbaijanis admired his distaste for Armenians in his election campaigns and speeches. One of the local respondents said that, in the years of the UNM rule, people would choose UNM even if they put a cat as a candidate. Even during the rule of Georgian Dream in 2016 parliamentary elections, Marneuli's 36th constituency voted for UNM's local candidate Ahmad Imamgulyev. He based his election campaign on ethnic-based populism, which was widely supported by the local Azerbaijanis. As a result, he secured 47.41 % of the votes. Tensions arose as state security forces came to the area, as his rival was Tamaz Naveriani, a

³² [Kakhishvili L, Keshelava D., 2021. Georgia.Political Landscape of Georgia](https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/18417-20220419.pdf)

³³ [https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/18417-20220419.pdf/](https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/18417-20220419.pdf) Table 5.6

Svan-rooted Georgian. Georgian Azerbaijanis and local Svans have a history of rivalry and violence, so, when faced with a choice between a local Azerbaijani and a Svan, it is likely that local Azerbaijanis would select a compatriot. And in the recent elections, despite not diverting many resources or giving a high place on the list for a minority individual, they got the second highest amount of votes after Georgian Dream in ethnic minority regions. The reason for this is that many people from the minorities only know two parties - UNM (referred to as 5) and Georgian Dream (referred to as 41).

Coalition for Change

Coalition for Change is a coalition of liberal parties of “Girchi-More Freedom”; “Ahali”; “Droa” and “Republican”. Most of the prominent figures of the coalition are past members of UNM. They are presumed as the wealthiest opposition group in terms of campaign funding. Their election campaign was mainly focused on four pillars: “Georgian Charter”, “Rapid economic development”, “Modern Education” and “Regional Development and Decentralization”. Their campaign mostly attracts urban youth, as they mainly use social media tools for campaigning. The main disadvantage of the group is that almost all of the parties were formed after 2020, so they do not have enough public recognition or any loyal following. According to the local sources, Coalition for Change presented an ethnic Azerbaijani in their election party list. They nominated Oktai Kazumovi, the leader of “Activists for future” for the 10th place on their list. Additionally, they actively campaigned throughout the minority regions, often hiring volunteers from local youth for presenting their agenda. They also gave specific promises to the local Azerbaijani minority, such as making the one year Georgian language course in the 1+4 program free for everyone, increasing the number of schools and kindergartens, making access to the state services more available by offering translation service, and dividing the resources between the centers and regions equally. However, in the Kvemo-Kartli constituencies they performed very poorly.³⁴

Strong Georgia & Gakharia for Georgia

Strong Georgia is a coalition of centre and centre-left leaning parties. Lelo for Georgia, Citizens, For the People and Freedom Square movement are the main parties which constitute the coalition. Integration to the EU is also declared as their main goal. The “Strong Georgia” coalition presents a detailed political program with a focus on minorities. The program lists points like³⁵:

1. Employment of young people and increase in pensions;
2. Social and economic empowerment of the population living in the occupied territories and border regions, “offering more than Russia offers”;
3. Economic and political equality, increasing women’s participation in politics, eliminating wage gaps, protection from gender violence;

³⁴ <https://civil.ge/archives/631386>

³⁵ https://www.wecf.ge/2024/10/22/minorities_az/

4. Political empowerment of ethnic minorities, language learning and preservation of cultural heritage.

It is worth noting that this program is one of the best-reasoned and most widely disseminated on minority issues. This coalition had an ethnic Azerbaijani- Aqil Mustafayev in their election list as the 22th candidate. Aqil Mustafayev pointed out the issue of language in his election campaign. They also promised free Georgian language education to the recipients of the 1+4 program. Aqil Mustafayev was also endorsed by Ahmad İmamquliyev - the famous UNM candidate of UNM for Marneuli in the 2016 elections.

Gakharia for Georgia is the party of former Prime Minister and Minister of Internal Affairs at the time of “Gavrilov’s night”³⁶, Giorgi Gakharia. His previous ties to Georgian Dream are seen as a liability. His campaign is mainly focused on increasing social welfare, European integration and creating a technocratic government. Additionally, the party supports conservative policies towards LGBTQ+, similar to Georgian Dream. Gakharia for Georgia does not have any specific program towards ethnic minorities, and they campaign for making education of Orthodox Christianity compulsory for everyone, which could anger the ethnic Azerbaijani minority. Moreover, they have a neutral stance on the issue of language learning programs for ethnic minorities.

2024 parliamentary elections results in ethnic minority regions and comparison with previous elections.

Eventually, Georgian Dream won the elections with 53.92% of the votes. When the preliminary results were revealed, opposition forces blamed ethnic minorities for their defeat. To ascertain the truth, it is instructive to examine the final election results in regions with significant Azerbaijani minority populations and conduct a straightforward analysis. First of all, one must look at the proportion of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the electorate. Ethnic Azerbaijanis constitute 6.3% of the total population of Georgia, and this indicates that they represent at least 5% of the electorate. The 2024 election results of Georgian Dream in Georgian-Azerbaijani majority districts were as follows:

- Marneuli: 79.32%
- Bolnisi: 81.43%
- Dmanisi: 75.38%

These figures indicate that over 70% of ethnic Azerbaijani voters supported Georgian Dream. Taken together, this suggests that the votes from Georgian Azerbaijanis significantly contributed to the party’s overall victory margin of 3.92%."

As a result, it can be concluded that support from ethnic minorities was instrumental for Georgian Dream’s electoral success. However, this does not confirm the myth that minorities always vote for the incumbent party. To have a clear outlook, results of previous elections

³⁶ In 2019 Russian MP Sergei Gavrilov gave a speech in Georgian Parliament, which resulted widespread protests by the Georgian public

should be checked. For example, in the 2020 parliamentary elections in the Marneuli constituency Georgian Dream won only with 49.57%, with an overall turnout of 45.21%. Additionally, in the 2016 parliamentary elections, in the 36th constituency of Marneuli UNM won with 47.41% of the votes. Thus, it is evident that the ethnic Azerbaijani population does not consistently or uncritically support those in power. All of the governments in Georgia have consistently tried to keep minorities outside of the political processes. This can be observed in the small numbers of Azerbaijani candidates in the party lists of all parties. Participation of the Azerbaijani minority is formed by two main discourses. One is peace and stability, the other is promises of increasing integration efforts. In the recent election, Georgian Dream abused the first one, they even got support from the Azerbaijani media personality Khoshgadam Hidayetqizi, who is popular among the elders of Azerbaijani population. Moreover, Azerbaijani media organizations showed support to Georgian Dream, emphasizing peace and stability in the region³⁷.

Opposition parties either didn't have specific campaign goals directed towards the minority population or they promised widening the integration programs offering extended Georgian language services to them. Most liberal parties in Georgia overlook the ethnic diversity by endorsing the "we are all the same" discourse, which doesn't resonate with the minorities.³⁸ Georgian Dream often uses local strongmen to gain votes in the elections. One can observe the violent characteristic of Georgian elections in the minority regions. For instance, in the recent elections, a fight broke out between a UNM candidate Azad Karimov and a local resident, which resulted in the former's hospitalization.³⁹ Overall, when looking into the history of elections in ethnic Azerbaijani majority regions, a lot of violence, fraud and manipulation can be immediately noticed. This tendency is especially evident in the language policy, as one just simply cannot participate in political processes or vote rationally without knowing the state language, and at least 50%⁴⁰ of the Georgian-Azerbaijanis do not speak Georgian.

Until recent elections, the Georgian Azerbaijani minority consistently demanded that political parties include at least one Azerbaijani candidate among the top 20 names on their party lists. Coalition for Change complied with that, but as a result it received only 2-3% percent of the votes in Dmanisi, Marneuli and other regions where ethnic minorities live. As a comparison, Gakharia's party did not carry out any policy related to ethnic minorities, and eventually he was assigned 1-2% of the votes in the minority regions. This affects the political participation of minorities negatively, as parties might be more skeptical about involving minority issues in their election campaigns. The failure of Coalition for Change has its own specific reasons. One identified challenge is the difficulty faced by the party in garnering support from Georgian Azerbaijanis when accompanied by an LGBTQ+ member during local engagements. Given the predominantly conservative nature of the Azerbaijani community, such meetings yielded limited success. Moreover, the platform's recent emergence may have adversely influenced its

³⁷ <https://oc-media.org/unm-member-accuses-azerbaijani-media-of-interfering-in-georgian-elections/>

³⁸ Elections and ethnic minorities: A call for Political parties/Kamran Mamedli

³⁹ <https://x.com/FormulaGe/status/1850114223369548284>

⁴⁰ <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/739/demographic-and-social-characteristics>

performance among the relatively less politically engaged Azerbaijani minority population. Additionally, one interviewee noted the presence of internal disagreements within the ethnic Azerbaijani community regarding the Coalition for Change's Azerbaijani candidate.

When investigating political participation of minorities in Georgia, it is perceived that many locals do not know the names of the parties, but rather their identification numbers. All parties in Georgia should have a specific number designated to them based on the electoral number of the party. Moreover, many individuals don't know the difference between the state and the government. For instance, when asked which party they intended to vote for, many elders expressed their support for the state, stating they would vote for the party that represents it, referring to Georgian Dream as the state's party.

Conclusion

Since independence, ethnic Azerbaijani minority in Georgia has made limited but significant advances in the sphere of political participation. All the successive governments of Georgia in general shared a similar approach to the minorities despite having some minor differences on issues like education, representation, etc. The implementation of the 1+4 program and the election of the first ethnic Azerbaijani mayor in Marneuli can be mentioned as milestone achievements. However, the diversity of political opinions from the minority community isn't the case generally, while the Georgian political arena is divided into many political parties having many ideological and policy differences. When looking at both pre- and post-election periods, it is observed that many local Azerbaijanis know and vote for mainly 2 parties - Georgian Dream and United National Front. The unsuccessful campaign of the Coalition for Change in the minority regions is a direct result of this trend. Moreover, many people support Georgian Dream, referring to it as 'the state,' which suggests that a significant portion of the population may not distinguish between the state and the government. This lack of substantial political knowledge has widely been exploited by subsequent Georgian governments, which have tried to keep the status quo towards ethnic Azerbaijani minority with minimal advancements by having one or two MPs in the parliament or in the education sphere such as the "1+4" program to increase their socio-political participation. Most welfare projects in Azerbaijani-minority regions are funded by SOCAR Georgia and the Azerbaijani government, which shows the Georgian government's disinterest in investing in the region. Even so, the situation is far from hopeless. Every year, more and more Azerbaijanis graduate from Georgian universities, and literacy levels of Georgian language among ethnic minorities is also increasing. This has a positive impact in the Azerbaijani minority's integration into Georgian society.

