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“IMAGE OF VOTERS” IN THE PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGNS OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES IN GEORGIA: SOCIETY, PEOPLE, NATION

Maia Bolkvadze

Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Batumi, Georgia

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4041-5871

Ruslan Baramidze

Niko Berdzenishvili Institute of Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Batumi, Georgia

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2763-9720

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at representing the peculiarities of construction the voters’ image in the pre-election campaigns of the three presidential candidates – Z. Gamsakhurdia, E. Shevardnadze and M. Saakashvili. The voters in their speeches were represented as society, people, citizens, as well as Georgian people or nation. In order to succeed in elections, politicians try (and have) to persuade the electorate in the relevance of their mapped policies, problems and that they offer the best ever solution – for the citizens, people and nation. In order to achieve the set aim, the presidential candidates in Georgia referred to logical reasons, also to well-known symbols, emotive images, various rhetoric strategies - which corresponded to the discourse of respective periods, where the main focus was made on national liberation movement, civil unity, implementing of reforms and etc. Thus, the target of the pre-election texts of the candidates was people (citizens, nation) and the outcomes of the elections were the expression of people’s (citizens, nation) will and desire. Accordingly, the “voters’ image” was constructed under the influence of actual challenges and desires.

The deliverables of the researched empiric resources allow us to conclude that the emphasis on justification of the necessity of voters’ participation in the electoral processes is one of the fundamental elements of Georgian political discourse, as the aforesaid device recurrently appeared in all the three presidential candidates’ pre-election speeches. On the other hand, the candidates themselves formulated – who was a voter (as a group, with the respective peculiarities, qualities and needs – best seen by the presidential candidates). Through achieving a unity with the people by means of representing themselves as community leaders, the candidates legitimized their actions justifying them as “authorized by the people”. Therefore, the ballot results expressed the community’s will and desire. The Georgian people and nation were especially visible in Z. Gamsakhurdia’s speeches. He considered Georgian people to be the main decision-making group and focused on other ethnic groups through mutual relationships. E. Shevardnadze’s pre-election texts were devoid of ethnic content. He mentioned Georgian people in relation to culture, state symbols, conflicts, foreign policy only. M. Saakashvili “returned” to talking about Georgian people, yet in his speeches he sometimes referred to the society in Georgia and sometimes expressed ethnic content. Thus, the voter represented “an unchanged group” during the period of its author/creator political leader. A new “image of voters” were created during the next the pre-election campaign by a new political leader.

The scientific novelty of the article is the analytical approach to the pre-election political texts (speeches, appeals, statements) of the presidential candidates in Georgia, aiming at researching the construction of Georgian “voter’s image” and reflecting the transformation of particular attitudes and the respective representation of voters in Georgian reality.

In practical terms, the paper will be interesting and useful for those scientific circles, students and other people dealing with the issues of political discourse and its formation, as well as for the researchers of public speeches.

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Introduction.

“In these elections, the Georgian nation has expressed its will, it has given its mandate of trust to the avant-garde of the national liberation movement – the electoral block - Round Table – Free Georgia has won! Congratulations of this victory, my friends!” (akhali sakartvelo, 1990) - this is how Zviad Gamsakhurdia starts one of his appeals after the restoration of the independence of Georgia. In the pre-election period, the orientation/focus of politicians on certain groups is subjected to some specific action strategy. Throughout their campaign periods, the presidential candidates in Georgia appealed to the citizens of Georgia, different organizations, region, group, as well as to specifically Georgians, Georgian people or the entire Georgian nation. In different periods, the image of “Georgian voter” was also “changing” in the statements or addresses of the presidential candidates, together with the intensity of addressing them. This paper aims to show how this feature transformed over the periods.

In the pre-election discourse in Georgia, the voter (as society, people, nation) was the major part of the candidates’ speeches. The role of people was important for the candidates, as far as the very people was the driving force of succeeding in vote-seeking and office-seeking. However, on some occasions, the presidential candidates addressed people not as all citizens of Georgia, but as Georgian people. In the pursuit of power, the candidates applied such means as praise of the nation, highlighting their role and “obedience” to their will, in order to consolidate the society, legitimate the set political actions and attain the aim – win the elections. Within the framework of this paper, we have presented only some examples from the pre-election speeches of Z. Gamsakhurdia, E. Shevardnadze and M. Saakashvili to show that major trend reflecting the views and standpoints of the presidential candidates about Georgian people/voters.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework.

The theoretical framework of the article has been based on those theoretical conclusions of the research of political discourse made by the prominent scientists in the field (among them Chilton, P.A., Dijk T.V, Fairclough, N., Schaffner Ch.). Political discourse is a difficult phenomenon, being studied extensively from various scientific angles. The political language, as the building material of the political discourse, is of special importance and significance, being the language of power (Feldman & Landtsheer, 1998). Political language is saturated with ideological contexts, political implications and emotional elements, expressed with written or oral means, where intention and ideology may be implicitly conveyed (Dijk, 1998). Each political text is created considering specific social, political, ethnical and other concepts, persuasion strategies or ideology being essential for the target group. Accordingly, the major portion of the election political discourse is nothing else than the instrument of influence on a certain target group.

The article is based on the analysis of the pre-election appeals and statements of three presidential candidates of Georgia, published in the newspapers Sakartvelos Respublika, 24 Saati and etc., as well as the media website civil.ge. The materials have been analyzed using the approaches of description, content analysis, of content analysis, discourse (critical) analysis, to consider the linguistic peculiarities and social environment, paying attention to the context, the author and time when such materials were released as well as all other features needed to understand the specificity of certain information.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

“The national liberation struggle continues in Georgia, but now its new stage is starting, after the Georgian nation, the strong majority of the population of Georgia has elected the avant-garde of our movement – Round Table for the Supreme Legislative Power” (akhali sakartvelo, 1990). In his speeches, Z. Gamsakhurdia often addressed Georgian people or nation as the strong majority of the population of Georgia. He often spoke on behalf of the people or emphasized the need to act on behalf of the people. Z. Gamsakhurdia was first elected as the President of the country by the Supreme Council of Georgia, and for the national legitimacy, the general presidential elections were called and held immediately. This period was distinguished since the ruling party and its leader sought to gain independence from the USSR and to put the relevant reforms into life. Accordingly, the informational field was saturated with the national-liberation and nation salvation motives.

The backing and support of the Georgian people was generally the background theme in Gamsakhurdia’s pre-election texts, thus the candidate is believed to try to show a cause-and-effect relationship between their will and his actions. Strengthening of his actions with the people’s backing is encountered in the speeches of the candidate, as shown in the following example:

“One of the reasons for the impressive victory in the presidential elections was the general public support to those fundamental reforms being implemented by the Supreme Council and the Government of the Republic of Georgia upon their election” (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1991).

During this period, while communicating with the population, he referred to public support for the course of the government. His appeals were built on the idea of mutual support, however, at the same time, the target addressee of his appeal was often specified, as shown in two examples below:

Example 1: *„We are standing at the crossroads of Georgian history, when the Georgian man gives the worldly, physical well-being up in the name of spiritual, national revival. While the revival means the renewal, and returning to one’s true self”* (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1991).

Example 2: *“We do hope that the population of Georgia will stand by the government they have elected, for the age-old aim of our people – free and economically prosperous Georgia – to turn into reality as soon as possible”* (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1991a).

As shown in the examples above, the candidate directly or explicitly mentioned the support of the government’s course by Georgian people and the population of Georgia, and expressed his hopes of being backed. The government was represented as a group - acting in the interests of the nation. In the first example, Gamsakhurdia presented the involvement of Georgian people against the existing social and political background of the country, speaking on behalf of the people – *Georgian man chooses difficult way in the name of the national values*. The candidate here implicitly involved his own role as well – he justified people’s actions but did not mention himself, while people’s actions were meant to be the respond to the government’s appeals and the source of legitimation of political actions. The first example is taken from the candidate’s speech, while the second one is from the election program, targeting at the entire population. Such alteration of focus is supposedly, related to the indirect and direct means of communication with the recipient-reader and the interrelation between the subject and object of the text.

When talking about Georgians, Zviad Gamsakhurdia referred to the qualities of the nation and people – but only positive ones, he never mentioned negative contexts, that we believe, was the way of influencing (manipulating) the society:

„For the recent seventy years, the intentional policy has been pursued towards Georgian people, with the goal of its national and cultural degeneration. Nevertheless, the Georgian nation managed to preserve its ethno-cultural identity, as well as its territorial integrity to some extent.” (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1991a).

As seen from the example, the candidate referred to the resilience and endurance of the Georgian nation. He emphasized people’s ability to preserve ethno-cultural features, as well as his view on ethnos

–“Georgianess” - was an innate and unchangeable “feature”. It is also noticeable, that any issue in Gamsakhurdia’s texts were mostly represented against the negative backgrounds, as in the example above he referred to – *the pursued policy towards Georgian people intending to degenerate the nation*, while contrasting it with the positive qualities of the nation – *its ability to preserve its ethno-cultural identity* – as a strong basis for the stability and thus, happy future of the nation. The negative and positive contexts were created by the lexical units with the respective connotations, that enabled the author to show his attitude towards the reality. The similar tendency is shown in the following example:

“The best solution would be if we gave our principles up, abandon the fight for independence and sign the alliance agreement. But it would be a betrayal of our ideals, our principles, and I believe, Georgian nation would not accept this” (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1991b).

The speaker showed such an interrelation between the initiator of a difficult decision and the object of this decision, when, on the one hand, the source of legitimacy (Georgian nation) equaled to the actor’s (the candidate’s) views; on the other hand, he indirectly confirmed his legitimacy. In terms of certain conditions, the candidate created the image of Georgian people who did not give up its principles – the struggle for independence and faithfulness to its ideals.

Thus, the role of people was a significant part of Z. Gamsakhurdia’s speeches. Based on the analysis of the materials, three main directions have been revealed in this regard – (a) when he appealed to and spoke generally on behalf of the population, (b) when he focused on Georgian people, nation, and (c) when he acted “in the interests of Georgian people”. In Gamsakhurdia’s speeches people’s image was created through praising people, public activism and mobilizing the support for his actions.

Eduard Shevardnadze.

After the overthrow of Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s government, the new ruling power first tried to gain legitimacy, and then to regulate the principles of power. Therefore, after the transition period, the focus of a new presidential candidate – E. Shevardnadze - was made on the need for legitimization by the public. It was crucially needed to deal with the existing challenges and governance difficulties.

In his pre-election period (and in general during his administration), E. Shevardnadze rarely used ethnic or other references. When speaking about himself, he infrequently mentioned his identity. Based on the analysis of his pre-election campaign of 1995, he stated only once:

“I am truly faithful to David Agmashenebeli’s legacy, his will, just like all Georgians” (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995).

According to the specific situation, he considered it necessary to show his connection with the historical figures of Georgia, as well as the fact that he was Georgian. In this way, Eduard Shevardnadze was trying to create his new image in order to distance himself from the Soviet past (Baramidze & Bolkvadze, 2022). Shevardnadze generally spoke about Georgian nation and Georgian people. In his speeches, Georgian people were not the main characters; he appealed to people in general, and more specifically – population and citizens. In one of his speeches he mentioned:

“It was not by chance when I said that I felt I was in Georgia for the first time. I said it because I felt that Georgian man and not only Georgian, all people who live here, representatives of all nations and nationalities, are returning to themselves, they are getting back Georgian character, Georgian nature, Georgian optimism and hope” (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995a).

Shevardnadze’s aim was to separate and generalize the target audience. In contrast to the previous leader, he tried to show civil unity and a kind of inclusiveness rather than ethnic one, that’s why he mainly talked about citizens, population and people.

While speaking about people, Shevardnadze underlined only positive contents (just like his predecessor), which, evidently, was intended to produce impact on the society, for instance:

„... our people are wise” (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995b),

„the wisdom and foresight of Georgian citizens has won” (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995c),

“the people have saved Georgia and its future with their shrewdness, wisdom, correct political instinct and orientation; democracy has won and the reaction has been defeated” (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995d).

As it is seen from the examples, the candidate charged the concept of people, its place and role with some political, linguistic and emotional connotations. His lofty and emotionally charged contents were expressed with the high-level lexical units, such as: *wise, foresight, shrewd*. In the context of legitimizing and justifying his own power, this format was primarily the means of representing the acting president from positive side - since wise people would elect a wise president and with his reasonable action plan, such prominent leader would help achieve their cherished goal.

Moreover, according to Shevardnadze, all the changes and reforms to be implemented were based on people’s desire to improve the current situation, for what the people had mandated the leader of the country – the president.

„With the support of our people, an attack against corruption, corrupt elements, clans has been made. The country has to recover from this severe disease as well, if we want to celebrate democracy, develop business, a socially oriented market economy and raise the level of public well-being.” (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995e).

The candidate underlined public support in order to eliminate threats such as corruption, corrupt element, clans. People saw the solution in effective action of the leader – the attack, therefore, achieving the driving goal of well-being. Thus, it was necessary to represent people and to “construct” people’s image, as a collective and unified idea, whose reasonable will was to elect the president and overcome the existing difficulties with his help.

Another strategy applied by the candidate was speaking on behalf of the people. By doing so, Shevardnadze tried to show his closeness and unity with people. He emphasized that any action carried out by him was an expression of the people’s will and was done in the interests of the people. Thus, a kind of legitimacy was achieved, when the source of power were the people, the population, yet they transferred such powers to the president. On the other hand, it was the way of solving the actual problem, seeking for better future, that was indeed the very desire and goal of people.

Those rare occasions, when E. Shevardnadze spoke of Georgians or “Georgianess” in his speeches or interviews, mostly related to some certain sensitive or general topics. Such examples might be divided into four groups:

1) greetings, for instance new year addresses - *“<...> It’s 2nd January holiday today... despite many problems, Georgian man still hopes for something good...”* (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995f);

2) when speaking about the state symbols - *the Constitution of Georgia* (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995g), Georgian State (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995g), Georgian money (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995h), Georgian army (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995i), Georgian bank (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995j). In these cases “Georgian” did not denote ethnonym, but was used as a synonym of the state and denoted the state;

3) Most often he used the ethnic terms when referring to Georgian-Abkhazian, Georgian-Ossetian (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995k), Georgian-Russian international relations or conflicts. For instance: *“Georgia is ready to use all forms of action, among them systematic bilateral contacts and other forms, to resolve Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts”* (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995l); *“We, Georgian people, great majority of the citizens of Georgia, want to make friends with a new Russia...”* (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995m); and

4) E. Shevardnadze also often used the notion of “Georgian” in terms of the context of culture, in particular, when he spoke of Georgian culture (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995g), Georgian theatre and cinema (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995n).

By doing so, the candidate seemingly tried to distance himself from those texts and contents belonging to the overthrown government. He refrained from talks on ethnical and national matters as much as possible. In general, E. Shevardnadze represented Z. Gamsakhurdia and the overthrown

government as the main political opponent (Baramidze & Bolkvadze, 2022). In this regard, in one of his speeches he stated:

I am ashamed when people remind me of the slogan “Georgia for Georgians only”... Only fascists might have had such a slogan. That is why I have intentionally called that regime <...> to be the regime of provincial fascism. It is a blot on our escutcheon and on the history of our people. Thanks God, it is over.” (sakartvelos resp’ublik’a, 1995o).

People, population, citizens had an important role in the pre-election speeches of Eduard Shevardnadze. He stressed the importance of public support, which was anticipated, as acting on behalf of the people might be assessed as the basic element of the pre-election propaganda of a campaign. The cases of praising of people in Shevardnadze’s texts are quite often, which, evidently, was intended to produce impact on the society. Herewith, talks on Georgian people were mostly devoid of ethnic content, and in those particular cases, when ethnicity was emphasized, Georgians were not meant to be the target audience of the pre-election campaign speeches.

Mikheil Saakashvili.

After the Rose Revolution, power was accumulated in the hands of the united opposition. The opposition tried to handle the challenges and crisis after the E. Shevardnadze’s period and to build a new state. During this period, it was of paramount importance to maintain public support to retain the power and implement respective reforms.

Unlike Z. Gamsakhurdia and E. Shevardnadze, the later president’s – M. Saakashvili’s pre-election texts, interviews or speeches are available in “condensed” form - represented by short excerpts from his texts in different newspapers, as well as by journalists’ opinions and paraphrases.

During the pre-election period of 2003-2004, the candidate’s texts displayed equally relevant communication with the population of Georgia, as well as Georgians. In this regard, the topic of people’s involvement and participation in the electoral processes in the pre-election speeches of Saakashvili was relevant to the same extent as in the cases of previous two candidates. The candidate tried to enthuse and mobilize the people, to be supported for general social well-being, as seen in the following example:

„For our children to live in a peaceful, stable country; for every citizen of Georgia to have a future; for civil harmony and normal living and economic conditions, it is necessary the Georgian society to unite and only peacefully, not to allow an insurrection, the usurpation of power by Shevardnadze <...>.” (24 saati, 2003).

One more example: *„Everyone, whose heart is beating, who is a true patriot <...> stand with us, for not to be steamrolled over, not to be thrown mud at, not to be insulted and finally destroy Georgia...Don’t let them, people!“* (Bukia, 2003).

As seen from the examples above, Saakashvili referred to people as to a strong force that could stand up to insurrection, usurpation, insult and the destruction of Georgia. It is worth noting that Saakashvili enthused the people in the very interests of the people - he called on the society to respond as such action was justified for achieving auspicious results while emphasizing the unity and strength of Georgian nation.

On a number of occasions, the addressee of Saakashvili’s speeches were Georgians. While speaking on the Rose Revolution in the pre-election period, he noted that

„We, Georgians, have already created the history and showed the world what a democratic our country is” (Dvali, 2003).

Referring to the praiseworthy examples of Georgians, he spoke on behalf of new, proud Georgians and appealed to them. According to M. Saakashvili, the hope of new and proud Georgians – a happy and successful future, was based on universal support to the government.

In the cases of addressing Georgians, he spoke on behalf of Georgians protecting the interests of Georgian people. The goal of transfer of power was not only to regulate the internal situation; the new Georgia aimed at seeking international recognition. When talking on the elections, he noted:

“It was the first precedent of such activity in elections in Georgia. I realize how much responsible I become before the Georgian people for this support; but together we will do our best to fulfill the hopes of Georgian people, and I am sure, the whole world will see and appreciate the credible elections held in our country.” (Civil.ge, 2004).

In general, focus on the international significance, the importance of integration in various international organizations, the opportunities of sharing the international experiences with Georgian people, return of migrants and their engagement into the process of building new Georgia were central points of M. Saakashvili's speeches. To the journalist's question whether the ruling political force was pro-American or not, he answered:

“We are only pro-Georgian movement, having European orientation and sharing western values.” (sakartvelos resp'ublik'a, 2003).

He mainly spoke on behalf of people, as a kind of the representative of people and a defender of their interests:

“They falsely think that Georgian man has no dignity; they falsely think that Georgian people are stupid. <...> Do you really think people are silly?” (Bukia, S., 2003a).

In our opinion, speaking in the name of people (as a strategy) allowed the candidate to emphasize his closeness and unity with the community. In general, speaking on behalf of people or Georgian people is typical for the pre-election speeches of all three presidential candidates concerned. By using this method, the candidates were enabled to create a certain image of themselves – as people, community leaders, who took care of people and defended their dignity. It was usually followed by praising and glorifying of people, and stressing their role and significance in the achievements:

„The tyrant regime has been defeated in Georgia and it's thanks to you, people!” (Bukia, S., 2003b);
„...Georgian people inflicted a (catastrophic) defeat on the current government” (24 saati, 2003);
“We are proud of our people for the courage they showed during the revolution” (24 saati, 2004);
„...but the main character (here) is neither Saakashvili, nor Shevardnadze. The main character is the people, who yesterday made the history with their own hands.” (Chalagaridze, 2003).

As the examples show, M. Saakashvili highlighted the people's role in the ongoing processes – *“the main character is people.”* According to the results of the general elections, the ruling party and the president represent the interests of the people, legitimizing many actions. Thus, the president represented himself as the exponent and the executor of people's will – *“...made the history with their own hands”* and *“...inflicted a (catastrophic) defeat on the current government”*. In our opinion, the strategy of emphasizing the people's role and their involvement, might be considered to be one of the ways of manipulating the society, which was quite typical for the Georgian pre-election discourse.

In the speeches of Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgian people were represented through civil contents, while appeals to people included the contents of support and backing. The recipient (audience) was not only the source of legitimacy, but also the group that expected reforms and understood the usefulness of the new policy to be introduced by the future president. With the purpose of influencing public (voters') opinion, M. Saakashvili also applied the strategy of praising and glorifying of people.

Conclusions.

Thus, the emphasis made on the people's participation in the electoral processes is one of the fundamental elements of Georgian political discourse, as the aforesaid device recurrently appeared in all the three presidential candidates' pre-election speeches. On the other hand, the candidates themselves formulated – who was a voter (as a group, with the respective peculiarities, qualities and needs – best

seen by the presidential candidates). Each candidate started, continued and ended their activities pointing out that it was done on behalf of the people. The candidates themselves, achieved a kind of unity with the people by means of representing themselves as community leaders. That was a certain guarantee that in the future they would publicly discuss the community's dissatisfaction and would fight for their interests. To put it in other words, the candidates thus legitimized their actions, justifying them as "authorized by the people". They were delegated the power to express the will and wish of the community. Therefore, the ballot results expressed the community's will and desire.

The Georgian people and nation were especially visible in Z. Gamsakhurdia's speeches. He considered Georgian people to be the main decision-making group and focused on other ethnic groups through mutual relationships. E. Shevardnadze's pre-election texts were devoid of ethnic content. He mentioned Georgian people in relation to culture, state symbols, conflicts, foreign policy only. M. Saakashvili "returned" to talking about Georgian people, yet in his speeches he sometimes referred to the society in Georgia and sometimes expressed ethnic content. Thus, the voter represented "an unchanged group" during the period of its author/creator political leader. A new "image of voters" were created during the next the pre-election campaign by a new political leader.

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