



# PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN GEORGIA

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# **Public opinion about local government in Georgia**

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to describe and analyze public attitude towards local governments in Georgia. Are local government institutions considered important and are local citizens interested in how they function? Are they informed about local government activity? Do they trust local elected officials and are they satisfied with results of local government performance? Finally, how do local authorities and citizens communicate and what is the level of community involvement in the daily functioning of local public affairs? These are the principle research questions addressed in the following sections. Indirectly, they tell us much about the decentralization of Georgia. It is a well-known rule that in a very centralized setting, local governments are perceived as meaningless institutions, while the transfer of more powers and autonomy to elected local institutions contributes to increased interest in their operation (Dahl & Tufte 1973). The level of decentralization – as it is often commented upon in further parts of the text – also influences other dimensions of the popular perception of the local government institutions.

The main source of information is a survey of 1500 adult Georgian residents, conducted for OSFG during the summer of 2011<sup>1</sup>. However, results are often presented in a comparative perspective. The comparison is related to the time dimension; therefore results of an earlier OSFG survey (conducted in 2008) is also taken into account, as well as a 2009 survey conducted by the GORBI Gallup International Center for the University of Warsaw, within a LGI-OSI financed project. The other dimension of comparison refers to the international perspective. In particular, several results are collated with similar research conducted in Poland. Polish decentralization reform has been perhaps the most comprehensive decentralization reform among all post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and therefore it provides an interesting point of reference for the analysis of the situation in Georgia. Various sources of data, related to several Polish research projects are used in these comparisons. Occasionally, I also refer to comparisons with neighboring countries of Georgia – Armenia and Azerbaijan – which the GORBI survey conducted in 2009 for the University of Warsaw as the source.

## THE SURVEY SAMPLE

The survey was conducted from a random sample of 1500 adult residents of Georgia. 90% of the respondents were ethnically Georgian, while the only other noticeable ethnic group was Armenian (5% of the sample) – for details see figure 1. Since the ethnic structure is relatively homogenous, results discussed further do not refer to ethnic composition.

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<sup>1</sup> More comprehensive information about the survey may be found in the next section of this paper.

Fig. 1.

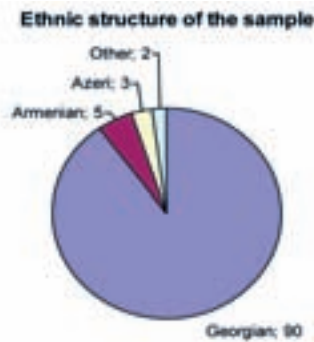


Figure 2 describes the location of the respondents. Almost  $\frac{1}{4}$  live in the capital city of Tbilisi and almost half of the sample consist of residents of rural villages. The location (as revealed by numerous, worldwide academic research) is important because it statistically correlates with the perception of local government institutions and a readiness to be involved. Quite often, residents of small towns and villages feel better informed about their local governments (than people in big cities) and more often feel they have an impact on local authorities and are more satisfied with local government performance. However in Georgia's case, 2006 brought significant territorial consolidation reform, in which local government institutions function only on a level of relatively large, former rayons. With some simplification, we may say that while citizens of towns and cities have town halls and local councils (sakrebulo) located in their home settlement units, the residents of rural areas do not have their own local government institutions, although their local self-government administration is located in a nearby town (the distance to the town is sometimes significant). Therefore, the location of residents may often be a powerful factor that differentiates the perception of local government operation. This variable is often referred to in further analysis.

Figures 3-6 illustrate the gender, age, education and income structure of the respondents. In some cases the structure is strongly related to the location of residence – this is especially the case in regards to education and income. More educated and more affluent respondents are found mostly in Tbilisi and other big cities. Therefore, the analysis of the impact of education and income on the perception of local government institutions must be conducted very carefully. For example, the education structure interferes with location of residence, and the impact of the two variables cannot be easily distinguished. It either requires sophisticated statistical techniques (such as partial correlations, multi-level regression analysis models etc.), or analysis of the impact of education performed separately for the smaller sub-samples of the homogenous type of residences. For simplicity of the presentation, the latter approach has been applied in the following sections of this paper.

Fig. 2.

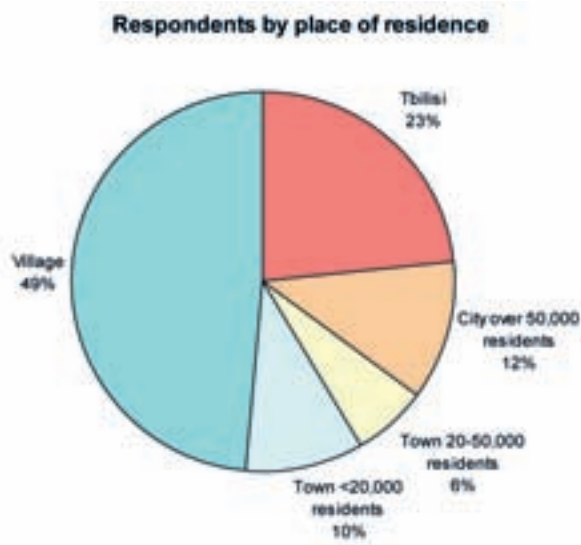


Fig. 3.

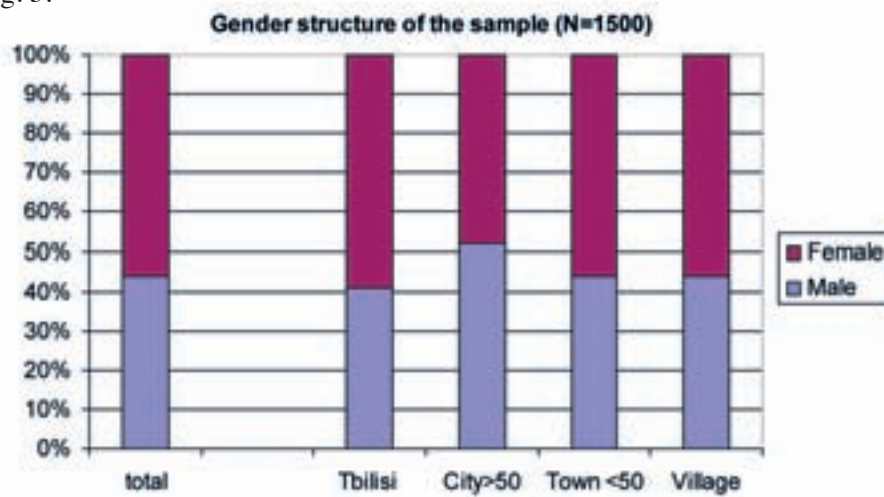


Fig. 4.

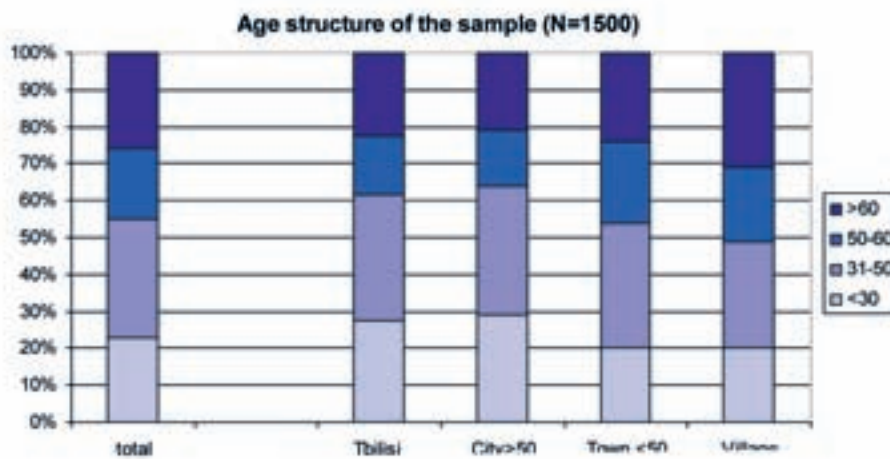


Fig. 5.

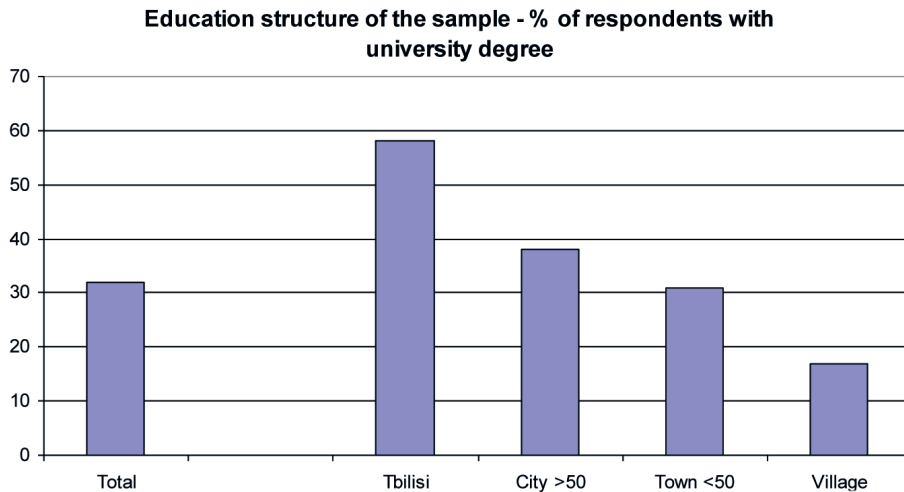
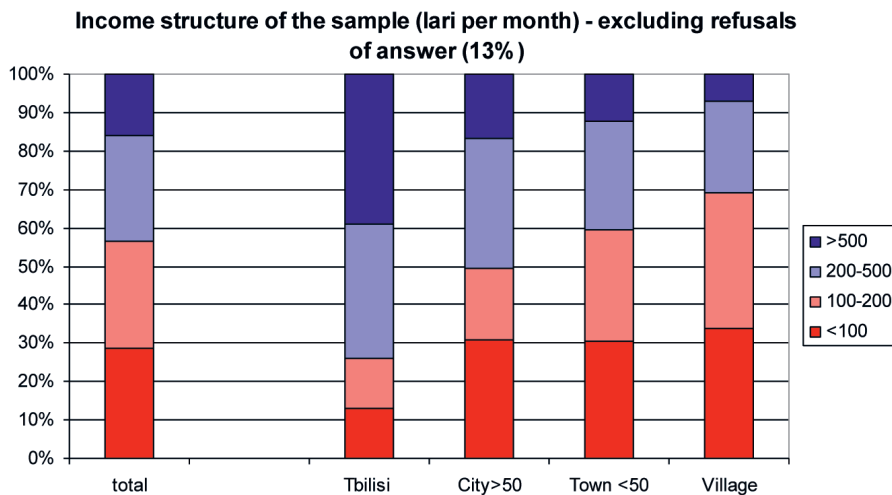


Fig. 6.



## DO PEOPLE CARE ABOUT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS?

Interest in local governments may be perhaps best measured, not by respondents' statements in the survey, but by their actual behavior; especially their willingness to vote in local elections. According to official data, the turn-out in the last two local elections in Georgia was just below 50% (47% in 2006 and 49% in 2010<sup>2</sup>). This result puts Georgia into the group of European countries with a local turn-out clearly below the average, but not dramatically lower than some countries with a well established tradition of local democracy (for details see table 1). The turn-out is not significantly different from Poland and Hungary, and higher than the United Kingdom. It is also only marginally lower than Slovakia. However, the difference from most of the remaining European countries is quite significant.

<sup>2</sup> 2006 data after Khomeriki 2007, 2010 – [www.osce.ge](http://www.osce.ge). Unfortunately Losaberidze 2011 report for OSFG is silent about the turn-out, so I can use no precise data about variation of turn-out among local governments.

**Table 1. Typical turn-out in local elections in European countries**

Over 60%	50-60%	40-50%	<40%
Austria Denmark Finland Germany Greece Netherlands Portugal Spain Sweden	Czech Republic France Slovakia	GEORGIA Hungary Poland	United Kingdom

*Source: Swianiewicz 2001, Kaczmarek 2004. Data refer to elections in 1998-2004 period.*

It is a well-known phenomenon that the election participation numbers that surveys reveal is usually higher than the actual, official data. To some extent this is a result of the self-selection of respondents (politically non-active citizens refuse to answer surveys more often) and to some extent it is because people feel voting is a civic obligation, so they want to present themselves in a positive light, stating they participated even if they stayed at home the day of elections. We notice the same phenomenon in OSFG surveys. However, while the difference in the 2007 survey was moderate and did not vary from numbers typically found in other countries (actual turn-out was 47%, declared turn-out was 54%), the difference in the 2011 survey is astonishing (49% according to official data, 80% declared in the survey). Moreover, while in 2007 the declared participation followed the well-known pattern noted in several countries before (in local elections turn-out is usually higher in small towns and villages than in large cities), in 2011, the pattern of variation was not very clear. It is difficult to say what might be behind these highly variable survey results – they may result from methodological errors in sampling methods, or the administration of the questionnaires, or other factors which are difficult to detect.

In the 2011 OSFG survey, only 10% of respondents stated they were not interested in local government activity, while 12% are “rather uninterested.” On the other hand, 27% expressed strong interest and 51% of respondents admitted that they are “rather interested.” Interestingly enough, the level of interest is not related to income and insubstantially related to the level of education (citizens with a higher education noted a slightly higher interest, but the difference is on the margin of 0.05 of statistical significance). There is a greater dependence of stated interest and size of the settlement unit; as in almost every country, residents of small towns and villages express an interest in local governments more often than residents in the largest cities. Life in small settlement units is “more localized” and even the physical distance from rural villages to the town hall does not change this pattern.



## WHAT AND HOW DO PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS?

One major measure of local government knowledge is discerning how many constituents know any of their local representatives. To this end, the survey asked the names of elected officials. In Georgia's case, it is imperative to be able to distinguish between: *gamgebele*, chair of local *sakrebulo*, any councilor (member of *sakrebulo*) and local *rcmunebuli* in rural villages. The results are presented in table 2.

**Table 2. Knowledge of local government officials (percentage of respondents being able to give a name)**

### Gamgebeli

	2008	2009	2011	Poland 2007
Total	72	41	55	82
Tbilisi	92	13	100	NA
City >50,000 residents	73	60	54	80
Town <50,000 residents	83		58	
Village	55	46	33	84

### Chair of sakrebulo

	2008	2009	2011
Total	45	NA	32
Tbilisi	26	NA	47
City >50,000 residents	38	NA	21
Town <50,000 residents	59		36
Village	58	NA	27

### Ordinary member of sakrebulo

	2008	2009	2011	Poland 2006
Total	24	25	26	42
Tbilisi	1	8	45	NA
City >50,000 residents	13	24	12	28
Town <50,000 residents	34		24	
Village	41	35	22	55

### Local rcmunebuli

	2008	2009	2011
Village	43	NA	66

Some of the results presented in table 2 are rather surprising. First of all, it is remarkable to be able to discern such a sudden variation of results within the relatively short period of three years. Secondly, contrary to common knowledge in other countries and theories explaining local politics, the 2011 data suggests that knowledge of local representatives is higher in Tbilisi and relatively low in rural villages. One explanation for this surprising convention might be the recent reform of the institutional system of the local government in Tbilisi. In particular, the introduction of the direct election of the *gamgebele* increased the visibility of the elected leader. But the reform could also have raised the level of debates on the local government in the city, which might also contribute to the sharp increase in the level of knowledge of ordinary members of the *sakrebulo*.

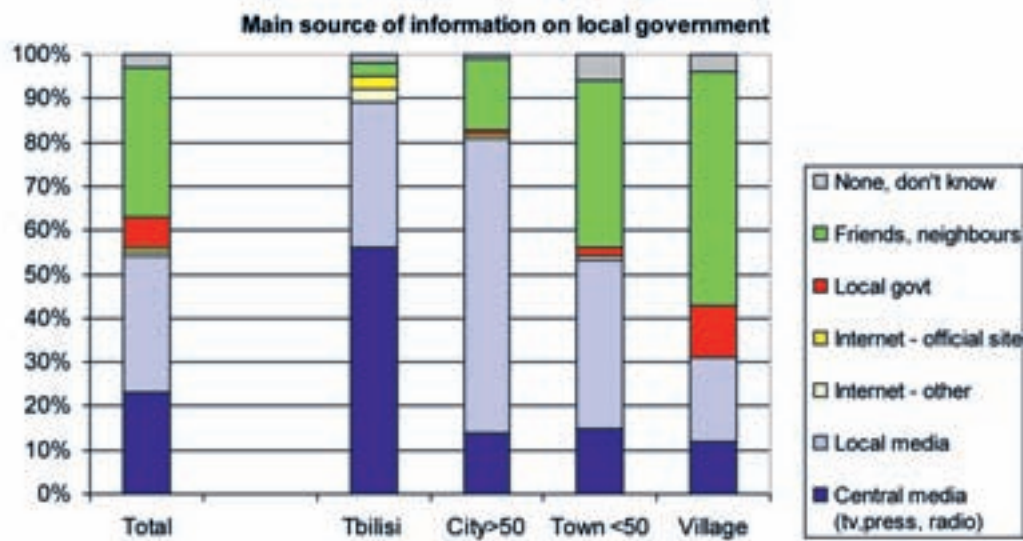
It is more difficult to explain the dramatic drop in knowledge of the local government politicians by residents of rural villages. A possible reason may be the result of territorial consolidation reform – for village people, local government in the rayon center is a distant institution they feel alienated from. The main “contact person” for them is the local *rcmunebuli*; therefore, he is the most recognized person among all local government officials. But this explanation has at least two weak points: (i) it does not explain why the level of knowledge was still relatively high in villages in 2008, in spite of the fact that territorial reform was introduced in 2006; (ii) it does not explain why a weak (and decreasing) knowledge of local officials is also found in towns below 50,000, which are usually seats of the local *sakrebulo*. An alternative reason of these surprising results may be seen in the methodological problems related to the 2008 and 2011 surveys. It should be noted that the 2009 survey results correlate more with “general expectations” based on well-established theories and are perhaps more reliable than the other two surveys. Nevertheless, there are some common generalizations worth highlighting:

1. Residents’ knowledge level of their local officials is in almost every case significantly lower than the case of Polish local governments. Local governments in Georgia are responsible for a very narrow set of public functions and their competencies are relatively weak. This explains why the personal ties between citizens and local elected representatives (or at least general knowledge and interest in local politics) are on a relatively low level, certainly much less than in Poland (as we can see in the table 2).

2. Education is a powerful factor in explaining differences in cognition of local officials. For example, according to the 2011 survey in rural villages, only 33% of residents know the name of their *gamgebele* and 22% know the name of any member of their *sakrebulo*. But if we consider only rural respondents with a university degree, the figure rises to 49% in the case of *gamgebele* and 31% in the case of the *sakrebulo* member.

But what is the citizens’ source of local governmental knowledge? Figure 7 shows the survey findings summary.

Fig. 7.



First of all, there are different modes of information dissemination, depending on location. In Tbilisi, the main source is the primary media: television, newspaper, radio. It is natural that the local government of the capital city attracts much journalistic attention and the public can easily learn about the people in their government by reading the national newspapers or watching the major TV news networks. In other major cities (such as Kutaisi, Rustavi, Batumi, Poti), central primary coverage is not as comprehensive, but there is quite a well-developed network of local newspapers, radio broadcasts and TV stations. Finally, in the smallest towns and villages direct knowledge and direct contacts among people plays a much more significant role, as the main sources of data and information distribution occur at meetings and in conversations with friends and neighbors.

There are two more striking observations. One is that official channels of communication initiated by local governments themselves (such as official bulletins, meetings with local government officials) work relatively poor and only play a marginal role as sources of information. They are noticeable in villages and small towns, but even in this case, they play a much less important role than information from media and direct contacts with friends and neighbors. The second observation is the internet; a very limited source of information on local governments. This source is mentioned by some Tbilisi respondents, but even in this case its role is negligible. In several countries, local e-governance (including e-information, e-consultation and the wider concept of local e-democracy) is increasingly popular, but in Georgia it still seems to be a virtually unexploited resource.

Although the general pattern of information sources is similar to all social groups, there are some differences related to the age and level of education of the respondents. In Tbilisi and

other big cities young and educated respondents use internet as primary source of information more often than other people (and age is more important than education). But even in cases of citizens younger than 30 years old and people with university degrees, no more than 12% of these respondents indicate the internet as the first source of information. Meanwhile, the internet is totally immaterial for young, educated people living in villages – perhaps because smaller local governments do not provide any information through their websites and the internet is hardly available in some small villages. Nevertheless, young people in villages use the local press and watch television more often than older people while at the same time, young people rely on gathering direct information from friends and neighbors to a lesser extent than older respondents.

A similar question on the importance of various sources of information was also asked in the 2008 survey. The pattern of answers was similar, but the main change has been an increasing role of local media and a decreasing role of capital-based television and press. If the growing role of local media is affirmed, then the change can be interpreted as a positive sign of the development of local civic societies.

## **DO PEOPLE TRUST LOCAL GOVERNMENTS?**

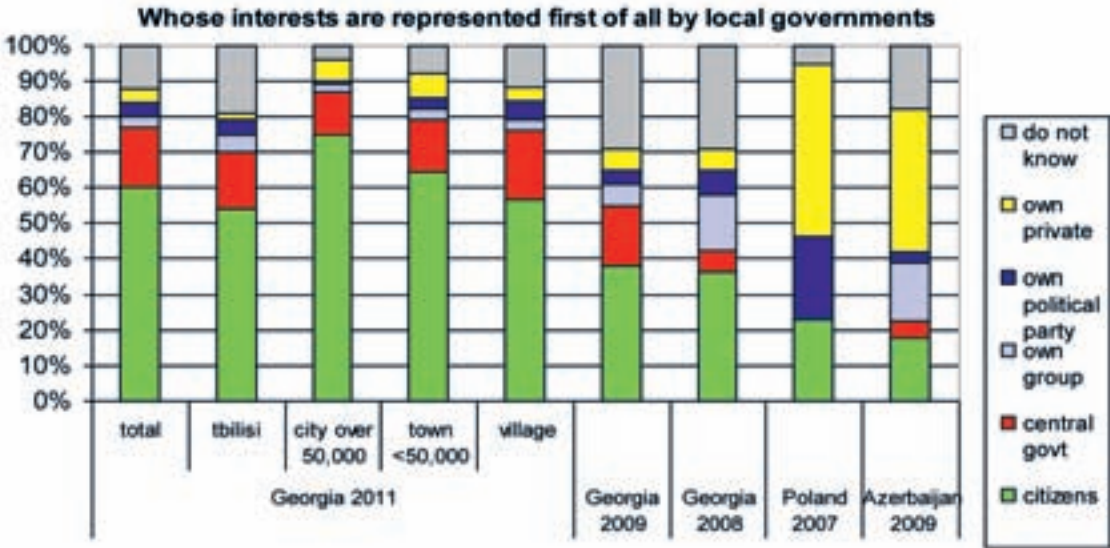
Public opinion about whose interests are represented first by the city mayor is another issue discussed in this paper. Answers provided by Georgian respondents are in general optimistic in this respect, if we compare them with those from other countries (see figure 8). For example, Azerbaijani respondents predominantly claim that local officials performing public duties attend to their own interests first of all.

In Georgia, the belief that mayors represent the interests of the whole community is by far the most frequently expressed opinion. But the next numerous group of respondents claim local officials mostly take care of the central authorities' interests on a local level. Significant differences between Caucasus countries are meaningful and indicate the different roles of local self-governments. While in Georgia it is seen as an extension of central authority, in Azerbaijan it seems that local self-government is not an important political institution at all, but rather an arena for a clash of interests of local figures.

What is interesting here is that a great number of respondents were not able to answer this question at all (almost 1/3 in Georgia in 2008 and in 2009, over 10% in Georgia in 2011, and nearly 1/5 in Azerbaijan). It is another illustration that local self-government institutions are weakly rooted in people's consciousness and reflect the weak role local governments have in providing

public functions. Polish respondents, although very critical towards their representatives in local government, are quite well-informed and disclosures of a lack of knowledge are very rare. It is not an accident that in Poland, the question of whether local authorities represent the central government's interests was not asked. This proposition was probably too ridiculous for both the authors of the questionnaire and the respondents.

Fig. 8.



As previously mentioned, the results of the 2011 survey differ significantly from those of 2008 and 2009. The proportion of respondents with no opinion dropped dramatically, while at the same time, the proportion of those believing the interest of the local community is the chief motivation for local politicians increased significantly. This result, if confirmed by future surveys, is another positive sign of the gradually increasing role of local governments and better communication between local authorities and local communities.

A relatively high level of trust towards local officials is also confirmed by the answers to questions referring to the perception of corruption. Corruption is a problem in local governments according to 14% of respondents, and the variation according to the size of a local government is very small. The figure is also slightly lower than for corruption in Georgia in general (17%), which means that according to public opinion, local governments are the least corrupted public institutions. Compared to other former Soviet Union countries, both of these scores are very impressive.

## ARE PEOPLE SATISFIED WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE?

Once again the answers are rather positive. 59% of respondents are satisfied with the performance of their *gamgebele* (48% rather satisfied and 11% definitely satisfied), while a negative opinion was expressed by only 18% of respondents (7% dissatisfied and 11% rather dissatisfied). Opinions of the local *sakrebulo* are almost identical, unsurprisingly, since people usually view local government bodies as one institution and do not distinguish between segments. However, there are a couple of features which make the Georgian situation different from most other European countries.

1. There is a considerable group of respondents (25%) who do not have any definite opinion and answered, “do not know” in the questionnaire. This is perhaps one more sign that local government institutions are seen as relatively unimportant and citizen interest in their performance is limited. In Poland, the number of “do not know” responses for similar questions is several times lower. It is quite revealing that it is also much lower when it comes to assessing the Georgian central government (11% “do not know”, ie. proportion more than twice lower than in the case of local governments).

2. The opinions of local governments are slightly less positive than the central government. In most European countries, the situation is opposite. For example, in Poland the question of performance of various public institutions has been asked every quarter for over 20 years. For many years, the range of positive opinions of the local government varied between 60% and 70%, while for the central government it was highly irregular but almost every time it was considerably less for local representatives (sometimes the number of positive opinions on the central government was even two to three times lower). One may expect that this specific pattern in Georgia reflects, among other things, the relatively powerless position of local governments, which cannot be acknowledged for accomplishing many spectacular achievements.

3. The pattern of differences between big, medium and small towns and rural areas is also different than in most of European countries. In small communities, the link between citizens and local representatives is tighter. There is more mutual trust, flow of information is smoother, and as a result, local governments are more accountable to the local population. Consequently, there are several studies indicating that citizens of small municipalities are more satisfied with local government performance. But in Georgia this is not the case. Although the differences are not very significant, the highest level of satisfaction has been found in Tbilisi and the lowest in rural villages. There might be two parallel explanations for this observation. First is related the radical territorial consolidation reform which did not concur with a functional decentralization. Village citizens may feel less satisfied because they do not feel they are represented in the local *sakrebulo*, which is relatively remote from them. Secondly, a very weak level of fiscal equalization among municipalities should be mentioned as well<sup>3</sup>. As a result, smaller municipalities located in the countryside are especially powerless, since their financial means to provide any functions are extremely

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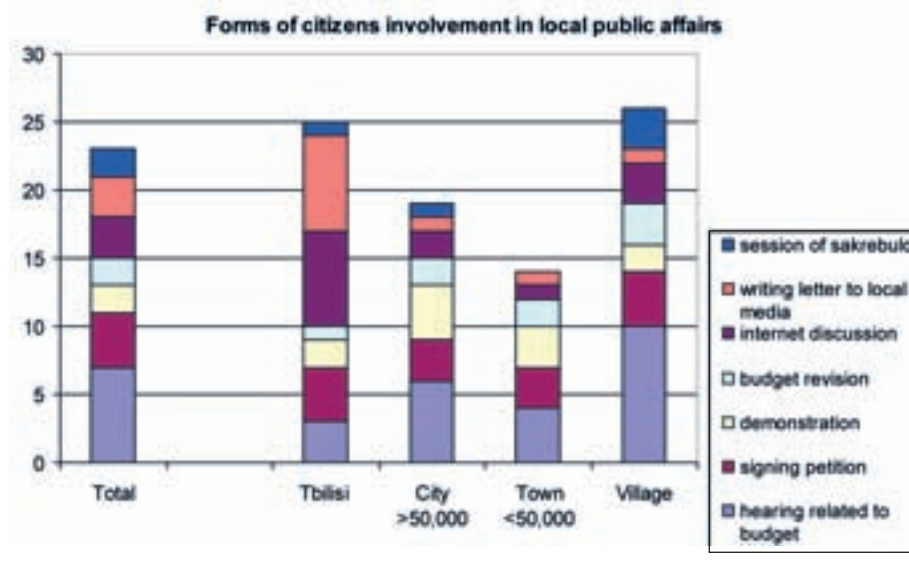
<sup>3</sup> For illustrations of the weak fiscal equalization in Georgia see for example Swianiewicz & Mielczarek 2010.

limited. If any local government may indicate impressive successes, it is in relative range of Tbilisi, not less affluent peripheral municipalities. This observation recalls the results of Hajnal’s (2001) studies on Hungary and Borecky & Prudky’s (2001) research on the Czech Republic. In both cases, the level of satisfaction was higher in small municipalities, but the rule did not concern small municipalities with less than 1,000 residents. In such cases, a low capacity of local government overshadowed the “sociological beauty” of the small community, and negatively influenced popular perception of the local government performance. In Georgia, this is not related to territorial fragmentation, but rather to a weak equalization mechanism and huge differences in the level of economic development, which is very low in small, peripheral municipalities. But the mechanism of a poor capacity overshadowing potential “sociological benefits” of the proximity, is the same.

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Figure 9 demonstrates how often Georgian citizens declare their participation in various activities related to the operation of a local government. The total amount of positive responses to questions on various forms of citizen involvement is over 20%, with the highest proportion among citizens of Tbilisi and rural villages. In rural areas, the most popular form of involvement is participation in public hearings related to the budget (10% of all rural respondents, but only 3% in Tbilisi). The other form which is clearly more common in small settlements than in large cities is participation in the sessions of the local *sakrebulo* (4% of rural respondents, but only 1% in large cities). At the same time, there are also forms which are more typical in large cities, and Tbilisi in particular. These are: writing letters to the local media (7% of Tbilisi respondents, but only 1% in other local government units) and participation in internet discussions (7% in Tbilisi, but only 1-3% in other categories of settlement units).

Fig. 9.



But the data presented above may to some extent be misleading (or misinterpreted) since the same person could be involved in several means of participation. If we count the number of respondents who declare any form of direct involvement, the figure drops to 14% (varying from 12% in Tbilisi to 16% in rural areas). The figure cannot be assessed as high. According to a recent survey in Poland<sup>4</sup>, the proportion of citizens who participated in any forms of consultations organized by local authorities is 17%. The difference between the two scores (17% in Poland and 14% in Georgia) does not seem very significant, but we should understand that the activities in the Polish survey were defined in a much more narrow way than in the Georgian OSFG survey. For example, it is difficult to treat participation in a demonstration or the signing of a petition as a consultation organized by local governments. If we exclude demonstrations and petitions, the proportion of active citizens in Georgia drops to 10.5%<sup>5</sup> - between 9.5% in Tbilisi and 13% in rural areas). It should be also mentioned that the figure for Poland is considered highly disappointing and recently, there has been several initiatives<sup>6</sup> undertaken in order to stimulate more active community involvement in local public affairs.

Citizen involvement is more frequent among respondents with a university education, but the impact of education is not very high. Additionally, it is a bit less common among young people (below 35 years old), while most frequent among middle-aged people (35-50 years old).

50% of Georgian citizens believe that local governments want to learn of the public's opinions on various local issues and as many as 33% think that public opinion is really considered and taken into account when actual decisions are made by local authorities. These figures may be considered high. In the research conducted in 4 large Polish cities, the number of positive answers for the question about whether local authorities take into account opinions of citizens when they are making important decisions, was much lower – 21% (Swianiewicz et al. 2006, 2011). The responses in the OSFG survey seem to reflect a generally positive attitude of Georgian citizens towards public authorities and a relatively high level of trust towards the public institutions. However, it should be recalled that citizens do not see local governments as important public institutions, so the scope of the important decisions made on a local level is not considered to be very high.

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4 Spring 2011 survey on a sample of 980 respondents.

5 And still, participation in session of *sakrebulo* is not necessarily an element of participation in consultation.

6 Including the draft of the specific law "On the strengthening of citizens participation in local government..." prepared in the Chancellery of the President of Poland.



## EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS LOCAL POLITICIANS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

What qualities (according to citizens) should local politicians have in order to fulfill their duties properly? The same question was asked in Georgia in 2009 and 2011. The answers may also be compared with similar questions asked in Azerbaijan in 2009 and in Poland in 1991. It is worth mentioning that data about Poland was collected very shortly after the beginning of local government reform, which makes comparisons with Georgia especially interesting. Respondents could assess (in a scale of 1 to 5) the importance of several qualifications. The summary of answers is presented in table 3.

In the case of several features and skills of local politicians, the answers are not surprising: He or she should be honest, have speaking ability (charisma), be able to solve disputes and have good relations with the local community. It is worthwhile to focus on elements which differ significantly between Georgia and Poland of those days to those that distinguish Georgia from Azerbaijan. First of all, Azerbaijani and Georgian respondents put more (than Polish citizens) emphasis on higher education and the professional experience of their representatives in local self-government. Perhaps this is because self-government positions are not perceived in a category that represents the local community but as a function reserved for elites working for the community. Polish respondents were not so demanding of their representatives in local self-government.

**Table 3. What sort of qualities do you think a local councillor should have in order to do a good job for his/her municipality? Indicate your answer in a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 is not important and 5 is very important (mean scores in the 1-5 scale are presented in the table).**

	GE 2009	GE 2011	PL 1991	AZ2009
good morals	4,71	4,87	4,34	4,48
higher education	4,56	4,68	3,27	4,44
good knowledge of local problems	4,64	4,89	4,65	4,46
good connections to higher levels of government	4,09	4,29	2,94	4,09
administrative experience or an experience of work in local government	4,28	4,61	3,65	4,22
Entrepreneurial spirit	NA	4,55	4,34	3,82
membership in a political party of the government	2,99	3,51		3,22
membership in another political party (other than the ruling party)	2,71	2,90	2,15	2,64
expertise in specific subject matters	3,75	4,69	3,64	3,99
good speaking abilities	4,24	4,75	3,94	4,34
ability to solve conflicts	4,63	4,90	4,57	4,53
good contact with local people/ support of local community	4,66	4,88	NA	4,48
long-time residence of the municipality	4,01	4,43	NA	4,1

Characteristic for South Caucasus countries (and a quality more desired than in Poland), is having contacts on a central level. It is a good illustration of the significant level of intervention and influence that the center has on local governments. This opinion is additionally strengthened by the fact that the only qualification assessed as more important by Polish than by Caucasus respondents (although the difference is marginal) is a knowledge of local problems.

A small percentage of respondents indicated membership in the ruling political party as a desired feature. Most respondents in Georgia (and in Azerbaijan) expressed skepticism about possible membership of a local councillor to an opposition political party. However, for Polish respondents, the membership of councilors in any political party was far less important than for citizens of Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Finally, Azeri and Georgian respondents value the administrative experience of councilors much more than Poles do. It may reflect two facts. First, the role of councilor is seen as more administrative than representative. Second, in Poland shortly after the political turn-over of 1990, administrative experience from the previous regime was seen as negative, or at most, a neutral factor for efficient operation in the new, decentralized environment. There was a common feeling of discontinuity and something new starting in the 1990 municipal elections. In Georgia (and even more in Azerbaijan), despite the dramatic shift from Soviet to independent republic, there was an attempt at reforming the old, existing structures in the local government system without breaking ties with the tradition of the old *soviets*. It is very revealing that many local officials treat the history of their city government as a kind of continuity (so it is possible to talk, for example, about something which “has a 30 year tradition in our council”), while for most Polish municipal leaders (and a large proportion of ordinary citizens), local self-government started in 1990 and whatever happened before, did so in “another world.” As Lipman and Blair (1995) noted about Ukraine (this observation is even more valid in Georgia and Azerbaijan) “*people see little difference between national and local government because they still view them as part of the undifferentiated state apparatus.*”

It is worthwhile to point out that (discussed above) the differences between Georgia (and Azerbaijan) and Poland are not unique, but rather typical in comparison with other Central-East European countries in which decentralization reform was more radical. Local Democracy and Innovation data (used in the table 3 for Poland) is also available for the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. In each of these cases, the pattern of differences with scores obtained in South Caucasus countries is very similar.

Finally, there is the question: which experience do Georgian residents wish to relate to regarding further development of the model of local self-government institutions? In this case, we do not refer to the 2011 OSFG survey (which did not include relevant questions) but to the earlier 2009 survey conducted by GORBI for a LGI-OSI sponsored research project. The relevant question was asked in the survey conducted in Azerbaijan and Georgia. The results are summarized in the Table 4

**Table 4. Do you think that the local government system in your country should stay as it is or refer to one of following models? (% of answers, respondents could choose more than one option)**

	AZ	GE
Stay as it is	20	43
Follow models known from Western Europe	19	27
Follow the model known from Russia	6	0.3
Follow the model known from Turkey	11	1
Refer to own, historical traditions	1	3
Replicate the system which operated during the Soviet times	19	2
Look for a totally new, alternative model	15	7

*Source: 2009 survey by GORBI*

The difference in responses from the two countries is very significant. The attitude of Georgian society can be briefly summarized as conservative and pro-European (almost half the respondents are opposed to any change of the local government system and more than ¼ declare support for Georgia’s attempts to implement Western European models).

It would appear that from these responses that Georgians express little interest in local government issues, overall satisfaction with the situation in the country and a very strong tendency towards European aspirations.

The population of Azerbaijani respondents is much more divided. Extremely diversified options were expressed in 15 - 20% of votes: there is no need to make any changes (20%), if changes are needed they should follow West European models (19%), the Soviet system (19%), or look for a new model of local self-government system (15%). Not surprisingly, taking into account historic and ethnic ties, there is a significant proportion of those who prefer the Turkish experience (11% of responses).

Considering recent political events, it is easy to understand that Georgian respondents much less often (than respondents from Azerbaijan) refer to patterns originating from the Russian Federation in a positive context (0.3% and 6% of responses respectively) and from the former Soviet model (2% in Georgia compared to 19% in Azerbaijan). It is very telling that a small percentage of responses in both Georgia and Azerbaijan claim that when a new model of modern local governments is formulated, it should refer primarily to old, traditional structures of an organization at the local level.

Respondents' education has a significant influence on discussed opinions. The higher the education, the lower is the satisfaction of the current functioning of local government system. Additionally, a higher education promotes a willingness to follow the western model (in Georgia about 26% of respondents with a higher education believe that following the West European model is a good idea, while the same opinion is shared by only 14% with lower than secondary education). Furthermore, the Soviet model is remembered as a good solution, mainly by people with a lower education (for respondents with a primary or no education it is 10% in Georgia, and in the case of respondents with a higher education - only 2%).

As mentioned earlier, local residents' interest in local self-governments and decentralization is very low. In this situation it is understandable that answers reflect the opinions on local self-government issues to a lesser extent, but they are much more a reflection of the political situation and of the attitude towards neighboring countries and Europe.

## **SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of the survey may be summarized briefly:

- ▶ Local governments are not perceived as very important public institutions. The interest of citizens in local public affairs is limited, as is the knowledge of institutions and politicians involved in local government operations. This is confirmed not only by a lacking knowledge of councilors, mayors and other officials (and other questions directly related to the level of interest), but also by a high rate of “do not know” answers given to several questions in the questionnaire;
- ▶ To a large extent this low interest reflects a very low level of functional and financial decentralization of the country, which has been proven in several earlier reports. It is additionally strengthened by the perception of local governments as local arms of the centralized state, rather than as independent political actors having local legitimacy, driven by accountability towards the

local community. As one Georgian expert told me in an interview two years ago:

*People still believe that everything that should be done, even in the small villages somewhere in the mountains, should be done by the president. If they don't have power, if they don't have a water supply, if a local shop doesn't work, they are ready to write a letter to the president of the country; "he should take care of us."*

- ▶ The channels of communication between local government and citizens are poorly developed. It is rarely seen that citizens use accepted sources of information when they seek information about their local government's activity. Indirectly, this indicates a poor development of communication strategies on a local level;
- ▶ Internet is a highly underused means of communication. It concerns not only remote rural areas, but – to a somewhat lesser extent – also the major cities in Georgia;
- ▶ There is also a relatively low level of community involvement in local public affairs, measured by the participation in various forms of local civic activities. One of the reasons of this low participation may be that citizens do not see local governments as important institutions, therefore, involvement does not matter anyway;
- ▶ At the same time, the level of trust in local politicians is generally high, as well as the level of satisfaction with local government performance. This seems to reflect a generally high level of support for Georgian public authorities;
- ▶ Similar to the results of other countries, both the perception of local government and the activity of citizens are related to the social status of the respondents. In particular, citizens with a higher education are usually better informed, more interested and more involved in local public affairs. Age matters for some of types of behavior only; for example, young people use the internet more frequently as a tool of participation in public discussions and tool of communication with local governments. The typical (known from international research) pattern of big city / small town / rural area variation is somewhat skewed by the radical territorial consolidation reform implemented in 2006. Typically, residents of small towns and villages are better informed, more satisfied and more involved in local government operation than residents of large cities. In Georgia, this rule may be observed to a lesser extent since: (i) people in some villages are far from *rayon* administrative centers and see the town hall as a very distant institution (and their knowledge of local officials is sometimes limited to the local *rcmunebuli*); (ii) strong disparities in the level of economic development, together with inefficient equalization mechanisms, result in local governments which are seen as particularly powerless in remote rural areas (and influences both the level of satisfaction and interest in their operation);

► The co-existence of the trust and satisfaction on one hand, and a low level of interest, knowledge and involvement on the other, may be summarized as the “sympathetic disengagement” of Georgian citizens in local public affairs. 10 years ago, I used this term to describe the public perception of local government in Poland, but it seems to even better reflect the current situation in Georgia.

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