

Saakashvili's Allies Get Almost All 150 Seats

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

TBILISI — The official results of Georgia's parliamentary election were expected to show a landslide victory for the party of reformist president Mikheil Saakashvili, which is thought to have taken all of the 150 seats up for grabs.

Election chiefs said preliminary voting figures would be released later in the day, but an exit poll on Sunday showed Saakashvili's National Movement-Democratic Front bloc with 78.7 percent of the vote.

No rival party got over the threshold needed to qualify for seats in parliament, handing all 150 seats up for grabs to the Georgian leader's party, according to the exit poll.

The vote sets the seal on last November's revolution when Saakashvili, a 36-year-old U.S.-educated lawyer, led a popular uprising to topple the regime of Georgia's former president Eduard Shevardnadze.

But it also left the self-proclaimed champion of multi-party democracy in the awkward position of controlling what looked set to be almost a one-party parliament.

At a press briefing late Sunday, Saakashvili said: "I think the people have given their verdict."

"I am not pleased that there is not more opposition representation, because that would have helped my party too to consolidate. But that is the reality, the post-revolutionary reality."

Sunday's election was a re-run of a vote last year, which Shevardnadze was accused of rigging, triggering mass protests and a "rose revolution" — so called because of the flowers waved by demonstrators — which forced him out of office.

Saakashvili was elected to the presidency in January, becoming Europe's youngest elected head of state. Since then he has consolidated his support by launching a hugely popular crackdown on crime and corruption.

If the exit poll is borne out by the official results, the only opposition representatives in parliament will be the 85 deputies elected from single-member constituencies, who did not have to contest their seats Sunday.

A joint election observation team from democracy watchdogs the Coun-

cil of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe was due to give its verdict on the fairness of the vote on Monday afternoon.

But the chief of the Council of Europe delegation, Matyas Eorsi, pre-empted that, saying "these elections went better than the previous ones."

The United States is hoping the election will lead to political stability in Georgia. It is backing a multi-billion-euro oil pipeline which is being built across Georgia to export crude from the Caspian Sea to world markets.

There had been fears that the vote could lead to a new round of confrontation between Tbilisi and Georgia's Black Sea region of Adzharia, about 400 kilometers west of Tbilisi.

Saakashvili had put Adzharia's hard-line leader Aslan Abashidze on notice that he would take tough action — possibly even sending in troops — if the voting in the region was marred by ballot fraud.

That danger appeared to have receded when Saakashvili said that although there were violations in Adzharia, "to be honest I expected much worse."

However, Saakashvili said the elections sent a message to Abashidze, a holdover from Georgia's ousted regime who runs his region like a private fiefdom, that his days as leader of Adzharia were numbered.

The Georgian president said that preliminary results from three of Adzharia's districts showed that his party had defeated Abashidze's Revival party by a margin of two to one.

"I think that is an important message... for the local authorities there. The time of feudalism in Georgia is over."

The clean sweep by Saakashvili's party will allow him to press ahead with a radical program of reform.

The government is preparing legislation to revamp the tax code and reform the corruption-riddled customs administration.

It has set itself the target of plugging the holes in its budget and improving people's living standards in a country where the average wage is only \$50 a month.



Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow's Golovinsky court Friday listen to the judge's decision to ban them.

Court Prohibits Jehovah's Witnesses

By Seth Mydans

NEW YORK TIMES SERVICE

After six years of civil proceedings, a Moscow court on Friday banned activities by Jehovah's Witnesses in what members said could be a first step toward a nationwide ban.

A spokesman for the Christian denomination said the decision would be appealed. But he said the ruling increased the danger of attacks directed at Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and other former Soviet republics.

The spokesman, Christian Presber, said the denomination, which is federally registered, had 11,000 adherents in Moscow and 133,000 throughout Russia. Since the first trial started, in 1998, he said, city authorities have repeatedly frustrated its attempts to buy or rent places to hold worship services.

In 1999, members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, a monitoring body made up of European legislators, warned, "The case is a cause of concern for other religious groups who also expect to be banned if the Jehovah's Witnesses were to lose."

Presber said, "The prosecutor said in open court that this is just the beginning. When she's banned the Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow, the goal is to start the process for the rest of Russia."

He said the basis for the Golovinsky Court's ruling involved a 1997 law on freedom of conscience and religious association that the prosecutor interpreted as showing that the denomination was an "antistate organization."

A lawyer for the Witnesses, Artur Leontyev, said the case did not deal with any alleged incidents of wrongdoing but rather with the question of whether the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses were legitimate.

"This question has already been decided numerous times by the European Court," he said, referring to the European Court of Human Rights, "which ruled that it is not within a state's prerogative to examine the legitimacy of religious beliefs, much less pass sentence on them."

A Canadian legal counsel for the Moscow group, John Burns, said the grounds for the ruling were cited as "inciting religious discord, breaking

up families, violating individual Russian citizens' rights, inclining people to commit suicide and luring teenagers and minors."

He said that the allegations were not supported by evidence and that studies and testimony presented to the court refuted them.

"The big concern is what the extremists are going to do in Moscow and Russia when they hear about this decision," Burns said. "How many people are we going to see beaten up?"

Human rights groups say religious and racial intolerance have become intertwined with notions of nationalism in Russia.

In a report issued on Friday, the Moscow Bureau on Human Rights, an independent monitoring group, said that in polls it had conducted, some 60 percent of people living in Russia "have a xenophobic attitude and agree that representatives of ethnic minorities should be barred from political life and from living in large cities."

It added, "An estimated 5 to 6 percent are ready to carry out pogroms."

Welcome For Nadezhda

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

VLADIVOSTOK, Russia — Hundreds of flower-toting relatives and friends in Russia's Far East port of Vladivostok greeted the Nadezhda sailing ship that returned home after a 14-month round-the-world voyage.

Shrieks of joy from girlfriends, sisters, mothers and friends filled the air as Nadezhda's 187 crew members descended in their home port, most of them students of Vladivostok's naval university.

"It was the first time that I was away from my family for so long," said Nikolai. "But I was glad to see countries that I'll probably never see again."

Nadezhda — "hope" in Russian — sailed in January 2003, its trip dedicated to the 200th anniversary of Russia's first-time, round-the-world sail, when Ivan Kruzenshtern and Yuri Lisiansky circled the globe.

It visited St. Petersburg in May 2003 for 300th anniversary celebrations.

The crew were unprepared for the crisis that greeted them at South Korea's port of Pusan, their last port of call before home. The ship was detained on a request of a British firm, which claimed that Nadezhda's owner, the Naval University, owed it nearly \$60,000. The ship was eventually let go.

Peter Ustinov Dies Aged 82

By Richard Waddington and Paul Majendie

REUTERS

GENEVA/LONDON — Oscar-winning British actor and playwright Peter Ustinov, one of the world's most entertaining raconteurs and mimics, has died at the age of 82.

Author of more than a dozen books and even more theatrical works in a career spanning more than 60 years, Ustinov died of heart failure in a clinic near his home on the shores of Lake Geneva on Sunday night, his family said.

The actor and humorist, who was also well known for charity work, had been in hospital since shortly after Christmas when he was taken ill on his return from a holiday in Thailand.

"It was not a surprise, he was pretty ill. He had had a busy life and he was tired," his son Igor Ustinov told Reuters in a telephone interview. "But he certainly was not ready to go," he added.

Ustinov, who spoke more than half a dozen languages, won Oscars for his roles in the films "Spartacus" and "Topkapi."

The multi-talented entertainer completed his last film as an actor, about the life of 16th century German protestant leader Martin Luther, late last year.

Although often confined to a wheelchair by diabetes and a weak heart, he continued to appear in public until his

final illness. He was an ambassador for the United Nations' Children Fund.

Just 18 months ago, Ustinov said in an interview he was happy to work until he dropped "as long as I can be guaranteed that I won't know in advance when it's going to happen".

He led a richly varied life as playwright, novelist, film director, academic and as an active political campaigner against war.

Shortly before his death, the University of Vienna inaugurated the Ustinov Institute, dedicated to studying the history of prejudice and its impact on people, politics and conflict resolution.

"This was something that inspired him a lot. He wanted his ideas for the future to become a reality," Igor said.

Born in London of Russian parentage, Ustinov was a London revue star as a teenager and wrote his first play at 19. He made his first feature film at 25.

Ustinov was the first to admit that laughter had been a life-long drug, confessing: "I was irrevocably betrothed to laughter, the sound of which has always seemed to me to be the most civilized music in the world."

He was once asked what would be his ideal epitaph.

With a familiar twinkle in his eye, he swiftly decided on the perfect inscription for his tombstone: "Keep off the grass."

Study Suggests Media Incites Racial, Religious Intolerance

By Maria Danilova

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MOSCOW — National newspapers and magazines are one of the factors behind growing racial and religious intolerance and xenophobia, according to a new study.

A nearly two-year monitoring of about a dozen nationwide publications, conducted under the auspices of the Union of Russian Journalists, indicated that the main newspapers were promoting fear and hatred toward the mostly Islamic peoples of the Caucasus region, said Suliyeta Kusova-Chukho, president of the Association on Ethnic Problems, who conducted the study.

Kusova-Chukho said the overwhelming majority of the publications surveyed were breeding racism and xenophobia. While some contained openly nationalistic and racist rhetoric, others were more subtle, using provocative language or providing misleading factual information "to form the image of Caucasus natives and Muslims as carriers of aggression and potentially capable of blowing up anything around himself," she said.

"Today, Russia's Caucasus natives less and less feel themselves as Russians citizens," Kusova-Chukho said, adding that blinded by xenophobia some Rus-

sians do not even realize that seven republics of the Northern Caucasus are part of Russia.

But a similar survey conducted by Sova, a center for information analysis, concluded that while the Russia's national print media contained xenophobic rhetoric, it was not aimed exclusively at Muslims or natives of the Caucasus.

Sova director Alexander Verkhovsky said acidic nationalistic remarks in newspapers could be aimed at a variety of foreigners, including the Chinese or people from the Central Asian republics.

Pavel Gutionov, secretary of the Union of Journalists, said such editorial policies in the Russian mainstream press could in part be explained by a popular demand for nationalistic rhetoric.

Two openly nationalist parties, LDPR and Rodina, enjoyed a confident victory at the December parliamentary elections.

Nationalism sentiments have been increasing in Russia since the Soviet Union disintegrated, bringing about economic hardships and making Russians yearn for their former super power status and international respect.

Such feelings often lead to anger and abuse directed at the mostly Muslim dark-haired peoples from the Caucasus.