

LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT 100 YEARS AGO -
DISCOVER UNKNOWN HERITAGE



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Strategic Studies
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**Ministry of
Justice of
Georgia**

**National
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Self-Government in the First Republic of Georgia (1818-1921)



“Self-government is a better remedy for all the needs of our people. Wherever you plant it, you will bear fruit.. Every country, run more or less effectively, is broken up in parts to be better taken care of... To the credit of self-government, it must be said that it cannot do any more harm than the central government meddling in our daily life.”

Ilia Chavchavadze, “The Life and the Law”, 1877

The Beginnings

The success that our country has achieved in a rather short period, two and a half years (1918-1921), had its prerequisites that date back to the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. These prerequisites were: endeavors to introduce self-government in the cities since the 60s of the XIX century, and discussions held by certain social groups (the first group “Tergdaleulebi” headed by Ilia Chavchavadze, and “the second” and “the third” groups headed by Niko Nikoladze and Noe Zhordania).

Despite many restrictions from the Russian Empire, Georgia launched a set of initiatives in different areas: cultural (public libraries, schools and universities), commercial (partnerships, communes), and charitable (from both Georgian entrepreneurs and the partnerships and social entities). As a result, the beginning of 1918 already saw the following changes:

- In education – a strong network of rural schools and public universities (the result of the hard work of “the Society for the Spreading of Literacy among Georgians”, “The Bank of the Nobility”, “rural societies”), which was followed by establishment of the Georgian university in 1918;¹

1. In 1914, Georgia had a much higher percentage of literate people than Russia. In this regard, Georgia, along with Poland and Finland, was a leading region of the Empire.

- Well-developed commercial partnerships (such as the partnership of Kutaisi women in silk production, the commune of the village of Gulgula, the agricultural school of Tsinamdzghvriantkari and others);
- A quite well-developed self-government in the cities – thank to the self-government Tbilisi had the Funicular, the tram and urban greening; the municipal development plans of Tbilisi (the present Rustaveli and Aghmashenebeli avenues), Zugdidi, Batumi, Kutaisi and Poti;
- A strong social demand for reforms (cooperative movement, partnerships, elementary schools, communes), political readiness (such as the Bakhvi Manifesto drawn up in Guria during the Revolutionary period of 1905-1907, which contained almost modern-day views on human rights, etc.);

The society had clearly matured for the self-government system, and when the right time came, the social demand was so strong that no government could disregard it.

Independent State

Introduction of local self-governments accelerated after the Russian Revolution of February 1917 due to favorable sentiments that existed at the time in the Georgian society.

Local initiatives (starting with municipal self-governments becoming more active, ending with efforts of “rural societies” to transform into municipal entities) were so powerful, diverse and spontaneous that any political force that came to power, would be forced to respond to them. Frequently, the government – first the Caucasian Committee (1917), then Transcaucasia Seim (1918), and finally, the Government of the Republic of Georgia (after May 26, 1918) - responded to the developments post-factum.

As early as in 1877, Ilia Chavchavadze emphasized the necessity of forming a full-fledged system of self-government: “We believe we have provided sufficient evidence to encourage revision of the law on this issue, if we are to gain the goodwill of the village. And who would not want that! Yet, the village alone, like one link in the chain, cannot feed to the effectiveness of self-government. It should not start and end with the village. Villages must be followed by Mazra (county) and Mazras must be followed by the Governorate...”²

To its credit, the emerging Georgian state responded to the expectation of the population adequately and instead of standing in the way of the changes and attempting to centralize power (typical of many “young” states), focused on public engagement at the local level and establishment of appropriate institutions. “...*First we founded Erobas in Mazras and then proceeded with setting up communities. This approach we felt was necessary under the circumstances. Normally, we would start by arranging communities as these are the institutions that are closest to people and serve as a pillar of the State, and are therefore entitled to more authority.*”

2. Ilia Chavchavadze, “The Life and the Law”, 1877;



Tite Margvelashvili (1890 - 1946)

National-democrat, a member of the National Council of Georgia; Chief Eroba Supervisor of the Democratic Republic of Georgia; was shot in Tbilisi.

We intend to expand the rights of the community and provide the fitting legal framework for it. The government does not fear people gaining more power, thus it is trying to strengthen communities and then integrate them into Erobas...”³



Grigol Lortkipanidze (1881 - 1937)

Social-democrat, Defense Minister and Minister of Education of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, Deputy Chairman of the Government, Chairman of the Union of Erobas, was shot in 1937.

Moreover, the new system of self-government originated alongside central institutions of the new State and one of the drivers behind this process was the central government itself. This was clearly demonstrated by the official position of the Ministry of Interior of Georgia - law enforcement bodies were sometimes not just supporters but initiators of local empowerment.



Noe Ramishvili (1881 - 1930)

Social-democrat, the first Chairman of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, Interior Minister, Defense Minister and Minister of Education, a member of the National Council and the Constituent Assembly of Georgia, presumably killed by Soviet special forces in Paris.

3. Noe Zhordania, Internal and Foreign Policy of the Government, 1919

Outline of Self-Government System

Legal Framework

The legal framework for local self-governments in the Republic of Georgia was part of the 1921 Constitution of Georgia. Chapter 10 (articles 98-106) of the Constitution was entirely dedicated to self-government. According to the Constitution:

- Self-governments directed public affairs within the limits of their territory;
- Self-governments were elected by universal suffrage;
- Resolutions of self-governments could be annulled only by bringing an action before the court (the central government had the right only to suspend, not overrule, disputable by-laws of self-government)

The laws governing various matters were constantly changing. By the end of 1920, a set of draft laws (on new administrative units, state finances, community and others) was prepared laying the foundation for a single unified system. These draft laws were set to be adopted in the 1921 spring session of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia.



Nikoloz (Niko) Eliava (1876 - 1937)

Social-democrat, a member of the National Council of Georgia and the Constituent Assembly of Georgia, the Chairman of the Commission of Local Self-Governments; headed the Union of Municipalities of Georgia, was shot in 1937.

Administrative-Territorial Divisions

Administrative map of the Republic of Georgia



There were two levels of de facto and de jure self-government in Georgia.

1. First level of self-government was represented by rural communities and self-governing cities
2. Second level was represented by Mazras (former russ. “Uyezd” / counties)

Communities would form on the basis of “rural societies”. They had the right to merge with other communities or break up into new units, only with the permission of the Eroba assembly.

Communities had a council and the head of community elected for the term of two years, as well as their own property, income and budget.

By August 1920, there were 356 communities in 20 Mazras (except for Adjara, Artvin, Ardagan, Oltis (Oltu), Sochi and Zakatala Mazras) of Georgia.⁴ By then, formation of the first level self-government authorities was not completed in only two territorial units (Akhalkalaki Mazra and Gagra district).

4. Erobas' activities, Eroba, the Ertoba (The Unity), #192, 26.08.1920.



The list of communities included in the Erobas of the Mazras of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. The document is stored in the National Archive of Georgia: the Central Historical Archive of Georgia, Fund 1921, Descr. 1, case 254

Cities. Self-government structures of the cities started to emerge in the second half of the XIX century, preceding introduction of Mazra and community self-governments. Larger cities had the status of a Mazra, and all the cities, regardless of size, had the status of a self-government.

By 1918, there were 48 cities in Georgia (including the disputed territories). According to the Decree of 17 December 1918, elections were to be held in the controllable territory which comprised 34 cities.⁵ Throughout 1919, municipal council elections were held in 26 cities.⁶ The remaining cities maintained the local governments elected prior to the declaration of the country's independence.

The cities had a council elected for two years (from 20 to 90 members, depending on the size of the population) and a Gameoba (executive government) headed by the Mouravi (Headmen/Mayor/Governor), they had their own property, income and budget. The cities, where the number of residents exceeded 50 thousand people, were supposed to establish administrations for different city areas.

By early 1919, Georgia had 39 cities (except for Adjara, Artvin, Ardagan and Oltis (Oltu) districts) with their own self-government bodies.

5. At this stage, elections were not planned in some Mazras' centers (Gali, Ekaterinenfeld/Bolnisi, Tianeti, Tsageri) and in the cities where Georgia jurisdiction was not effective at the time (Batumi, Kobuleti, Ardagan, Artvin, Oltis, Alaverdi, as well as Atina, Tortumi, Rize, Hopa).

6. At the first stage, municipal elections were not held in 8 cities (Akhalkalaki, Manglisi, Shulaveri, Abastumani, Sochi, Khosta, Adleri, Zakatala).

Mazras (Counties). The territory of Georgia was divided in 21 *Mazras*.⁷ The Mazras were created according to the territorial arrangement of the Russian Empire. Based on this model, there were nine and seven Mazras in the former Tbilisi and Kutaisi Governorates, respectively; 4 Mazras – in Sokhumi district and 1 Mazra in Zakatala district.

Mazras had a representative body – **Eroba** (council) elected for the term of 2 years with 23 to 45 members, depending on the size of the Mazra, and a plural executive body – Gamgeoba had its own property, income and budget.



The list of elected self-governments of Mazras and cities of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. The document is stored in the National Archive of Georgia: the Central Historical Archive of Georgia, Fund 1921, Descr. 1, case 253



Demographic statistics of the Mazras and cities of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, 1920. The document is stored in the National Archive of Georgia: the Central Historical Archive of Georgia, Fund 1921, Descr. 1, case 257

⁷ It did not include the Adjara district (Batumi and Artvin Mazras) that Great Britain returned to Georgia in the summer of 1920; as well as disputed territories – 2 Mazras (Ardagan and Oltis) of Karsi district and Sochi uyezd of the Black Sea Governorate.

Responsibilities

Since there were no deconcentrated offices of the government in the regions, this responsibility was assumed by local self-governments under the guidance of the central government (the Constitution of 1921, article 98).

Therefore, the list of responsibilities of such self-governments was rather long:

- Introduction of local taxes;
- Management of local property and capital;
- Collection of state taxes;
- Improvement of public education;
- Settlement, improvement of living conditions;
- Development of public insurance and healthcare;
- Labor protection; setting up the labor exchange, etc.
- Social security services (incl. provision of the basic necessities);
- Management and development of all kinds of means of transportation and roads (incl. railways in the Mazra territories);
- Development of communications – post and telegraph;
- Environmental protection;
- Management of natural resources (land, water, forest);
- Fight against natural disaster (emergency, rescue and fire services);
- Promotion of culture and protection of cultural and artistic monuments;
- Development of agriculture and trade;
- Establishment of small credit as well as lending and saving institutions;
- Encouragement of cooperation;
- Keeping statistics of the Mazra;
- Provision of security and order (local police reported to community heads).

In addition to those listed above, the Mazras had the authority to:

- Organize conscription;
- Lead the land reform/privatization;
- Organize courts of law (organize the system of justices of the peace).

Some responsibilities of *Mazra* self-governments were undertaken by community self-governments, who had a much better understanding of the local population.⁸

In exercising their authority, self-governments enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. For example, self-governments had the freedom of setting rates of pay for public officials without any intervention from the central government.

8. David Losaberidze, Georgia – Two Kinds of Self-Government, The Eroba Sovlab - Soviet Past Research Laboratory, Tbilisi, 2018, p.p. 261-262.



**Benjamin (Benia) Chkhikvishvili
(1879 - 1924)**

Social-democrat, the President of the “Gurian Republic” (1905), Mayor of Tbilisi, Mayor of Sokhumi, Special Commissar of Batumi district; was shot in 1924 as one of the leaders of the uprising.

Funds and Property

The sources of income for Erobas and the first level self-governments were:

- Local incomes (tax and non-tax revenues, other receipts): property tax (land, forest, water, etc. including from State-owned enterprises); part of “concurrent” (income and profit) tax; trade tax; customs duty; transportation (freight turnover) tax; excise duty (within the borders of the Mazra. The rate for respective goods was 50% of the profit tax); individual duties/taxes levied by Erobas (councils);
- Equalization payments (transfers) to self-government bodies – the system introduced by the State to provide financial assistance to low-income Mazras;
- Other revenues (increase or decrease of financial assets, government credit);
- Revenue generated from economic activity.

Rates for some taxes (trade, transportation and others) were established (within the limits of the general government policy) and collected by the Eroba.

On the local level, both budgets were separated from each other:

- Taxes were partially distributed between the Mazra and the community (an Eroba could transfer 100% of some of the taxes to the community as well);

- The community, within the limits of the law, could set its own rate of the local duty that it found favorable;
- Besides, the community, within the limits of the law, could even set its own duties (including taxes in kind or labor conscription).

The total budgets of self-governments accounted for about 22% of the combined, consolidated budgets (440 million Manetis of 1.96 billion Manetis in 1920).

By the end of 1920, the materials collected from the inspection of the Erobas revealed that 440 million Manetis was used from the budgets of 15 Erobas of Mazras (except for Telavi, Sighnaghi, Kutaisi, Samurzkano and Akhalkalaki, where the data were lost) to finance the following priorities:

- General economic initiatives -18,1 %
- Public education - 17,8 %
- Industry, development of local production - 11,2 %
- Medical assistance - 10 %
- Economic development - 6,8 %
- Veterinary needs - 1,3 % ⁹

The way municipal properties were formed is worthy of mention as well. Self-governments (Erobas, cities and communities) owned a significant property, while transfer of state-owned property to self-governments free of charge was still underway.

From the beginning of 1919, the Government of Georgia started to transfer roads to Erobas (except for strategic roads of national importance and the railway), as well as the railway inventories that were located within their territories.¹⁰

The country's printed press regularly, almost daily, published the list of the sites transferred to self-government bodies by the central government authorities (ministries).

9. Eroba in Georgia, S. Avaliani, the Eroba #1-2, 01.1921.

10. Transfer of Roads to Erobas, the Kronika (Chronicle), The Kavkasiis Kalaki (the City of the Caucasus) #1, 15.01.1919, p. 30.



An announcement of elections of Lanchkhuti Municipal City Council in the newspaper The Georgian Republic, 1919, #32, a copy of the newspaper is kept in the Tbilisi State University library.

Public Involvement

There were a few norms prescribed by the law and widely practiced ensuring a rather high degree of public involvement.

- The law permitted organization of local referendums regarding the issues of local importance if it was demanded by 2/3 of the community council members;
- In the communities heavily populated with ethnic minorities:
 - where an ethnic minority made up more than 2/3 of the population, self-governments could hold meetings in the language of the local majority (however, all the documents had to be drawn up or translated into the official language).
 - Where an ethnic minority made up less than 20%, the self-government was required to ensure translation of the documents into the language of the minority (minorities) (e.g. Armenians, Greeks and Germans in the Borchalo Mazra, where the main ethnic minority were Azerbaijanis).

According to the plan, not only community centers but every village would have the rights to hold assemblies to elect its executive authority.

The civil society organizations and the media were closely involved in this process. The press (including national newspapers) covered the issues of local self-governance and the progress of decentralization reform extensively.

Municipal Elections – Formation of Self-Governments

Preparation for Elections

Preparation for local elections started even before the declaration of Georgian independence, back in January 1918. The Eroba elections were initially planned in 21 Mazras.

Early on, the situation in every region was different. In western Georgia, where political parties had quite strong local organizations and the level of education was generally higher, the process went on smoothly. The situation was, however, more difficult in eastern Georgia, especially in the regions populated by ethnic minorities. The biggest challenges were Abkhazia and Zakatala districts where the central government had a weak influence.

Difficult political situation, dissolution of the Caucasian front and advancement of Turkish army into the country, attacks of criminal gangs and the Bolshevik riots delayed the process significantly.¹¹ Western Georgia, including the politically most advanced Guria region, suffered the most. By summer of 1918, after the declaration of independence of Georgia and mediation of the German Empire with Turkey, the situation relatively improved. Consequently, in every region of Georgia, the situation was still challenging but stable.

Another, a bit more technical but still serious, problem was inaccurate voters' lists. The lists created in the previous period and processed for the Russian Constituent Assembly elections were useless due to massive migration of the population.



The list of voters of Eroba elections in Signaghi Mazra, 1921. The document is stored in the National Archive of Georgia: the Central Historical Archive of Georgia, Fund 1921, Descr. 1, case 248

¹¹ The reports of the Chief Eroba Supervisor are summarized from the following sources: the National Archive of Georgia, the Central Historical Archive of Georgia, Fund №1863 (Interior Ministry of the Democratic Republic of Georgia), Description №1, the Eroba (a report on Eroba), the Republic of Georgia #22, 29.01.1919.

The situation dramatically improved thanks to the efforts of the Georgian government, especially the Interior Ministry and the Chief Eroba Supervisor's Office, and the representatives of local institutions operating in Mazras.

Another driver of decentralization reform and preparation for local elections was the political decision of the central government not to wait for stability in the country's entire territory and hold elections stage-by-stage in the regions where the appropriate conditions were already present.

As for the disputed areas, the changes there were either:

- Carried out after the status of the area was finalized (Akhhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki Mazras; Sokhumi "Okrug"/District); or
- Were overtaken by the Soviet aggression (in Tiflis Governorate – the Lore zone of Borchalo Mazra; Batumi district – Batumi and Artvin Mazras; Kars district – Ardagan and Oltis Mazras; the Black Sea Governorate – Sochi Mazra; Zakatala okrug).

Eroba elections

The election administration was not integrated but rather decentralized – elections were run by Mazra election committees. The election day was announced according to the established rule and the elections were to be held in every district at the same time during one or a few days, however, some districts did have to postpone elections.



Ballot papers of political parties in the election precinct of the Samtredia electoral district during the elections of Eroba electors for Kutaisi Mazra; the document is stored in the National Archive of Georgia.

Election campaigns were run by mostly applying oral propaganda, demonstrations and visuals – poster and the like.

Elections were carried out in three stages (1918, 1919, 1920) because they had to wait for favorable conditions (including de-occupation) in different Mazras.

- The first stage of Eroba elections was held in August-December of 1918 in 12 Mazras (Tbilisi, Senaki, Ozurgeti, Kutaisi, Shorapani, Sighnaghi, Gori, Telavi, Dusheti, Lechkhumi, Racha and Zugdidi Mazras).
- The second stage was held in February-March 1919, the same time as the elections of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia (February 1919), in Abkhazia (4 Mazras: Gumisti, Kodori, Samurzakano, Gudauta), and in June-October in Borchalo, Tianeti, and Akhaltsikhe Mazras, the total of 7 Mazras.
- The third and the final stage was held in 1920. In January second elections were held in the Zugdidi Mazra, and in July-August Eroba was elected by the people of the Akhalkalaki Mazra.

All in all, 659 Council Members (Electoral College Members) were elected in 20 Mazras of the country: 45 in Tbilisi Mazra; 40 in Gori Mazra; 25 in Dusheti Mazra; 25 in Tianeti Mazra; 32 in Borchalo Mazra; 24 in Telavi Mazra; 43 in Sighnaghi Mazra; 33 in Akhaltsikhe Mazra; 31 in Akhalkalaki Mazra; 42 in Kutaisi Mazra; 44 in Shorapani Mazra; 27 in Ozurgeti Mazra; 25 in Racha Mazra; 23 in Lechkhumi Mazra; 38 in Senaki Mazra; 30 in Zugdidi Mazra; 38 in Samurzakano Mazra; 25 in Kodori Mazra; 38 in Gumisti Mazra; 31 in Gudauti Mazra.¹²

By 1921, the first convocation Erobas were operating in all Mazras (except in newly affiliated Adjara, Artvin and Zakatala districts); and Zugdidi already had the second convocation Erobas.

Voters turnout increased gradually: if the turnout was around 1/3 at the first stage (based on the outcome of elections held in 12 Mazras), in the following stages (elections in 9 Mazras), it exceeded 2/3. This was the result of relative stability in the country and a more efficient work of government organizations, but the key factor was increased involvement of the population who had already seen the actual results of the work of local governments.

12. Irakli Khvadagiani, *The Eroba, Sovlab - Soviet Past Research Laboratory, Tbilisi, 2018, p.p. 88-89.*

A historical document, likely a newspaper clipping, showing a statistical table of election results. The table is organized into several columns and rows, with some text at the top that is partially obscured. The document is aged and has a yellowish tint.

Statistical distribution of mandates obtained by political parties in the elections held in the Erobas of Mazras of the Democratic Republic of Georgia as of 1921. The newspaper "The Ertoba", 1921, №17. The document is stored in the National Archive of Georgia: the Central Historical Archive of Georgia, Fund 1921, Descr. 1, case 254.

Municipal Elections in the cities

Preparation for the first cities' municipal elections in independent Georgia started a little later. This did not delay things very much as the cities already had functional municipal bodies elected in previous years (in 1917 and earlier). In December 1918, the appropriate election regulations were created.

Municipal elections were organized throughout 1919 in mostly the same manner as Mazras' Eroba elections – the self-governments having the freedom to pick the date for elections in their own cities (for example, the elections of electors were held on February 2, in Kutaisi the elections planned for January and February were put off until March 9, and so on).

Nationwide elections were held in 26 cities. The second stage of the municipal elections (for other cities) was to be launched in Spring 1921 but the Soviet aggression prevented it.

Statistical distribution of mandates obtained by political parties in the municipal elections held in the cities of the Democratic Republic of Georgia as of 1921. The newspaper "The Ertoba", 1921, №17. The document is stored in the Tbilisi State University library.



Diomide Topuridze (1871 - 1937)

Social-democrat, member of the National Council and the Constituent Assembly of Georgia, Mayor of Kutaisi, was shot following accusations of being a member of the "Menshevik Center".

Overall Assessment of Election Results

Political forces:

- The total of 143 political parties and independent candidates ran for both (Eroba and municipal) elections. The Social Democratic Party of Georgia, as the country's leading political force, ended up with 1367 or 63.27% of Khmosanis / Council Members. Other parties – the Georgian Socialist-Federalist Revolutionary Party (11.92%), the National Democratic Party (9.65%) and the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries (5.41%) - gradually increased their representation;
- In most Erobas and cities, the Social Democratic Party received the majority of votes (including over 65% in 10 Erobas and 14 cities). Exceptions were a few territorial units (Borchalo and Shorapani Mazras, the cities: Sokhumi, Akhaltsikhe, Zugdidi, Senaki, Oni, Kojori), however, the opposition party could get majority of votes in only one city – Akhaltsikhe (20 mandates - Dashnaksutyun);
- The law permitted participation of the parties built around the regional or ethnic identity in the elections; most prominent among them were: the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) – Dashnaksutyun (2.41% of votes), Azerbaijani “Hummet“ (ran in a bloc with Social Democrats – 0.8% of votes); as well as, the Hellenes (Greeks') group, the National Party of Armenians; Russian Social Democratic Labor Party; and Socialist Colonists (the Germans living in Borchalo).
- The Bolshevik party candidate received one mandate in Kodori Mazra.
- Independent candidates received the total of 54 mandates (3.95% of votes), however some of them joined political parties (primarily, National Democrats) later.



A resolution of the Central Election Commission to place a separate ballot box for Muslim women. The newspaper “The Sakartvelos Respublika” (the Republic of Georgia), 1921, №24. The document is stored in the Tbilisi State University library.

Some important details:

- There were a few women among the Khmosanis / Council Members (4 in Tbilisi and 1 in Kutaisi). Election of Phari-Hanum Sophieva (“Female Robin Hood”), a Muslim woman from Qaraizai electoral district, as an independent deputy for the Eroba of Tiflis Mazra is especially worth noting.
- The degree of judicial independence was high, as evidenced by the following facts:
 - Election results in the city of Senaki were cancelled by Kutaisi District Court;
 - The opposition’s complaint demanding cancellation of the Akhalkalaki district elections was declined by Tbilisi District Court and the decision was further upheld by the Supreme Court (the Senate) even though the judicial panel considering the case was headed by an opposition member;

Last but not least, another regular election of Eroba was held in Ozurgeti in March 1921 despite the fact that Tbilisi was already occupied by the Russian army.



Eleonora Ter-Parsegova-Makhviladze (1875 - ?)

Social-democrat, a member of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia, a member of Tbilisi City Council.



Mariam Vardosanidze (1864 - 1943)

A well-known teacher and activist. The Head of the Women's Gymnasium of Kutaisi Eparchy. Kutaisi Erobas' Member from the Social-Democratic Party.



Phari-Hanum Sophieva (1884 - 1953)

An independent candidate, an elector of Tbilisi Mazras' Eroba Member., the world's first democratically elected Muslim women.

Self-Governments in Action

Besides describing how the elections worked, it is important to have a look at the actual change they brought to the country. Effectiveness of self-governments operating 1918-1921 can be assessed based on their achievements in various fields, which are as follows:

Economy:

- Despite the economic crisis, infrastructural projects were launched successfully. It was the self-governments who started building railway sections (Samtredia-Senaki, Gori-Tskhinvali, Kutaisi-Khoni) in the country and carried out major works. After the Soviet aggression, these works were discontinued and were only completed in 1940, after inconceivable mobilization of resources by Stalin in the USSR.¹³ Erobas created and/or launched some significant enterprises (such as the Kaspi cement plant, postal, telegraph and telephone services in Mazras, and others), even though these achievements were later claimed by the Soviet propaganda.
- Even though full statistical data are missing, we can still estimate the scale of these operations – in the 11 Mazras alone where the Erobas were formed in the first stage, 66 plants factories and other enterprises actually operated and generated revenue for two years (by the end of 1920).¹⁴
- Improvement of infrastructure, development of agriculture and local industry – consolidation of local technical resources (technicians, agriculturalists, economists and statisticians);
- In the areas where the cooperative movement was underdeveloped, the Erobas managed to supply local populations with food, basic commodities and working tools with the involvement of cooperative organizations; and where such movement was absent, assumed its responsibilities.¹⁵



Aleksandre Chikava (1882 - 1924)

Social-democrat, a member of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, Eroba supervisor for Zugdidi Mazra, was shot following the accusations of participating in the August 1924 uprising.

13 David Losaberidze, Georgia – Two Kinds of Self-Government, The Eroba, Sovlab – Soviet Past Research Laboratory, Tbilisi, 2018, p.p. 266

14 In response to the newspaper "The Communist", Al. Dgebuadze, the Eroba #222, 10.10.1920. Eroba in Georgia, S. Avaliani, the Eroba #1-2, 01.1921

15 Irakli Khvadagiani, The Eroba, Sovlab – Soviet Past Research Laboratory, Tbilisi, 2018, p.p. 88-89

Social issues and education:

- The self-governments built a network of outpatient clinics, thereby substantially reducing the spread of a new influenza virus (known as the “Spanish Flue”) after World War I that killed tens of millions of people in Europe. Although Georgia was in the pandemic risk zone, after prevention measures (arranging doctors’ meetings in Mazras, dividing Mazras in medical precincts, setting up hospitals and outpatient clinics, organizing supply of medicines), the death rates were lower than in, say, neighboring countries;
- Education became widely accessible to the public once new schools (mostly in villages) were opened by the self-governments. This continued the efforts of the Tergdaleulebi (“the Society for the Spreading of Literacy among Georgians“), keeping Georgia ahead of all the other regions of the former Russian Empire in terms of education, and in one of the top positions in the world;¹⁶



Aleksandre Lomtadze (1882 - 1924)

One of the leaders of the Social Democratic Party, Chairman of the Central Election Commission of the Constituent Assembly, Deputy Chairman of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia, Chairman of the Tbilisi Mazras' Eroba Council; died in exile in a Tashkent prison.

Political outcome:

- Empowerment of local governments, including in the regions with ethnic minorities, abated separatist sentiments significantly. The fact that regional and ethnic elites were to some extent involved in local self-government (Abkhazia, Akhalkalaki, Gori and Borchalo Mazras), demonstrates that the political course the Government had adopted was right. For instance, before the Russian aggression of 1921, the “Revolutionary”, the so called “Shulaveri Committee” created by the Red Army could not be staffed with local anti-Georgian ethnic Armenians, so Bolsheviks had to be recruited from Armenia.
- After Russia’s occupation of Georgia, some Georgians boycotted the Soviet pseudo-elections, which, along with a few other examples, speaks volumes of the work done by the local self-governments. The fact that the representatives of local self-governments did not move to the camp of the new government supporters, demonstrates just how effective the emerging self-governance system was.¹⁷

16. David Losaberidze, Georgia – Two Kinds of Self-Government, The Eroba, Tbilisi, Soviet Past Research Laboratory, 2018, p.p. 269

17. David Losaberidze, Georgia – Two Kinds of Self-Government, The Eroba, Tbilisi, Soviet Past Research Laboratory, 2018, p.p. 272



Leo Mikheil Shengelaia (Kiacheli)
(1884 – 1963)
Writer, social-democrat (member of
Alioni), Chairman of the Gameoba
Eroba in Zugdidi Mazra

Afterword

*“In Georgia, every single peasant knows what was gained from the Revolution and the “young” republic born out of it – the land and the democratic self-government: the land – that is, the right to work freely, without any fear that someone will take away the wheat you’ve worked hard to sow; the self-government – the belief that life will become better, easier and more civilized.”*¹⁸

*“... Under the previous regime, the Eroba was something one could only talk about or write about, now it’s a fact. Today, Eroba self-governments are scattered all over Georgia. Even in the remote areas where they had never known a teacher or a doctor, now both are present. The village is waking up, and people are getting used to being self-sufficient...”*¹⁹

Naturally, self-government in the first Republic was not perfect and many legal acts may seem inadequate in retrospect, yet, its major achievement was that regardless of a severe economic crisis and vague financial rights of Erobas, it engaged the Georgian citizens in the process of solving the issues of local importance on the spot.

David Losaberidze
January 12, 2019

¹⁸Wladimir Woytinsky, “Georgian Democracy”, Tbilisi, Tbilisi State University, 2018, p. 271.

¹⁹. Our Eroba, D. Oniashvili. The Ertoba #75, 02.04.1920, Irakli Iremadze, Election of Local Self-Governments in the Democratic Republic of Georgia, 2019