

(N.ZAALISHVILI, GEORGIA)

The First Voter project: A showcase for increasing participation of First Time Voters in the Electoral Process in Georgia



In most established democracies the trend has been of decreasing voter turnout since the 1960s. Low turnout is generally considered as to be undesirable and there is still much debate as to the reasons surrounding such a trend. While very often, low turnout is attributed to disenchantment, indifference or even contentment, scholars are still divided as to the cause of low turnout in mature democracies.

In new or transitional democracies, evidence is emerging that over time, turnout is decreasing which could be related to two main reasons. Firstly, the lack of excitement following the initial stages of democracy, including the first generation of voters, has an adverse effect on turnout, secondly, the evolution that the party system go through can lead to reduction party supply resulting in reduction of choice for policy-orientated citizen who are forced to choose only between the large surviving parties. This very often results in abstention instead of having to compromise on policies that they believe in strongly.

The reasons for low turnout can be numerous and to date, academics and practitioners are still grappling with the intricacies surrounding low turnout, however, there is one area where there is real consensus as to how best to tackle long term low turnout; and that is to deal with young and more precisely first time voters.

In 2010 the Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC) and the Centre for Electoral Systems Development, Reforms and Trainings (Training Centre) took the view that a strategy should be elaborated to engage first time voters in the democratic process and consequently a survey was conducted among young voter to assess the level of awareness. The result of the survey confirmed that there was a real need to increase election related awareness as well as active participation of young voters in the electoral process. Subsequently, the Training Centre launched the *First Voter* project which adopted a two-pronged approach. Firstly, to inform First Time Voters and Secondly, to educate First Time Voters. Although the project was initiated in 2010, it has now become an ongoing project and constitutes the core of the CEC and the Training Centre's engagement with young voters.

Below is general approach and outline of the First Voter project:

**1. Informing First Voters** means providing young people with information to explain voting procedures like place and time of voting, types of elections, criteria for the right of vote, formulation of voter lists and mechanisms for counting votes. For this purpose, the CEC and the Training Centre prepared the following informational materials and events:

- **Educational film "Procedures of Election Day,"** supporting young voters to understand activities of EMB and receive exhaustive information on the Election Day procedures; educational film and other informational/promotional clips were broadcasted in the

central and regional TV channels and radio stations; each ad was translated into languages of ethnic minorities along with sign language translation;

- **Illustrated memos and posters** for first voters, providing information to voters on the necessary procedures of voting;
- **Voter E-learning program**, including the convenient provisions for large number of users to increase the awareness with regard to voting procedures via the distance study method using the web-site of the Training Centre;
- **“First Voter”** event for the freshmen of the institutions of higher education, aimed at raising awareness of first-time voters and identifying their roles as voters within the election processes and in democratization of the country in general. Within the framework of this event students participated in mock voting process and observed procedures in full; Election-related questions were drawn from lotto and “best informed first voter” was identified among participants of the event; Participants were subsequently certified;
- **One-time open air events “moving puzzle”**, encouraging young voters to construct the informational puzzle board with the inspiring slogans, for example “GO TO VOTE” and enabling them to see the role of each person and the importance of every vote in order to hold fair elections in the country;
- **Permanent information meetings within CEC and the Training Centre** for the first voters, including representatives of ethnic minorities, enabling students to learn about the means of Elections in promoting Democracy, Electoral System in Georgia, structure and competences of the Electoral Body and voting procedures, which aimed to support the increase of young voters’ election culture and their motivation to participate in Elections;
- **Student debate-clubs** were created with the purpose of motivating of young people as well as increasing awareness. Debates on various topics are held at the CEC and the Training Centre on an annual basis. The winning team is given certificates of achievements.

**2. Educating First Voters**, comprises of activities targeted towards increasing awareness of young voters on elections, democracy and fundamental right of electing own representative, key principles to increase motivation and ensure full participation in this process. These activities cover concepts like functions of voters, their rights and responsibilities, importance of elections and every vote for decision-making and the influence of elections on the accountability of government. The following activities were implemented in this regard:

- **Educational program for students of general education institutions of Georgia** was established in partnership with CEC, Training Centre, Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia and UNDP. The implemented pilot project in public schools aimed at increasing election culture of students and holding school self-governance elections in a transparent and fair manner. The project covered 24 public schools of 8 towns, including the schools with ethnic minorities. Within the framework of the project the instructions were created for the procedures of elections of school self-governance bodies, and

recommendations were provided for organizers of these elections (civic education teachers, students); Instructions were translated into ethnic minority languages (Armenian and Azeri languages); Facilitators prepared by the Training Centre as well as the members of relevant District Election Commissions (DEC) conducted trainings for civic education teachers and students, according to the instructions created; Upon completion of the training cycle, elections of student self-governance were conducted in public schools. In order to raise motivation of students, at the end of the project 16 best students were identified and sent to 8 DECs for practical learning course.

- **Memorandum of Understanding was signed with 19 institutions of higher education** of Georgia (14 in Tbilisi, 5 in the regions), which aimed at increasing civic awareness of young voters, improving election culture and their professional development. Based on this memorandum the Training Centre has developed and introduced long-term and short-term educational programs in partnership with participant universities: short-term program is designed to provide cycle of trainings for 1st-2nd-year students of various faculties during election period (voters that turned 18 and vote for the first time), focusing on the issues related to the importance of participating young people in elections; Long-term program takes place every year for the duration of whole semester and provides fundamental study for the students of law and journalism faculty, delivering subjects on “Election Law” and “Information Coverage of Elections”. Within the framework of this program Training Centre has elaborated special curriculum, auxiliary manuals for students, collection of practical exercises and electronic presentations.
- **Educational program for the youth living at the orphanages and other foster institutions** was implemented in partnership with CEC, Training Centre, Social Service Agency and Association “SOS Children's Villages Georgia”. The continuous program enables young voters to increase civil awareness on democratic elections, find and learn about the importance of youth in this process. Teaching methodology comprises theoretical and practical teaching, followed by Role-plays (mock voting procedures, mock press conferences, debates and competitions on election-related topics).
- **“Electoral Development Schools” project** was developed in 2015 targeting youth as well. It aims at increasing civil engagement in the electoral process and contributes to the promotion of electoral issues among youth. The project was piloted in 10 election districts and aims to expand and cover the whole Georgia gradually. The training curriculum developed by the Training Centre and CEC gives the opportunity to the participants to receive knowledge on electoral related issues including: electoral systems, election administration, electoral stakeholders, democratic electoral principles, transparency of elections, election accessibility and gender equality.
- **Series of Grant Competitions** were provided by CEC and the Training Centre encouraging the involvement of NGO sector in the process of promoting the voting culture among the youth and increasing their activity in the elections. Grant

competitions are held on an annual basis targeting the groups of young voters, voters with disabilities, ethnic minorities and women.

Numerous important steps and efforts were made to increase the interest of youth towards election processes and their activeness in Georgia. There have also been some tangible evidences that the young voters' awareness and engagement with the electoral process has increased considerably. The benefits of First Voter project are still resounding in Georgia with increasing the network of partners on local and international level and implementing new initiatives in regard to foster the democratic development of the society.