

**Remarks by Central Election Commission of Georgia Chairwoman Tamar Zhvania accepting the 2017 Joe C. Baxter Award:**

Good evening. I am very happy to have the opportunity to address this very respectful audience on such a pleasant occasion. It is a great honor for me to stand here and be among the recipients of this honorable award.

The Joe C. Baxter annual award honors those who have devoted their service to the advancement of election administration. It is not easy to express what I felt following my nomination for this honorable award. Gratitude, pride, and encouragement are among the emotions I have as I am privileged to join all the prominent individuals who were worthy of receiving the Joe C. Baxter award in previous years.

To be honest, starting from the moment when I first got involved in the field of elections, the path to this award was rather long and challenging. On the way of promoting changes and introducing new initiatives, there is always doubt and inner struggle within each leader that requires great courage to overcome. I believe this award served as an incentive to each of its past recipients and gave them courage to continue serving their principles. For me personally, receiving this award is an encouraging sign that I must continue to be even more eager, and if required, to fight for the progress in which I believe.

If we look through the history of elections in Georgia, a special emphasis should be placed on the first democratic elections held in independent Georgia in 1919. Those elections demonstrated a very high level of inclusiveness and compliance with democratic principles, including not only the right of women to vote but also the fact that women candidates were elected to the constituent assembly. In addition, electoral rights were granted to representatives of ethnic minorities. This level of democratic principles introduced in election processes were quite rare at that time across the world. That independence lasted a very short period of time and after 70 years under the Soviet Union, Georgia started to develop its electoral culture again in 1990, when the country regained its independence. For the next 27 years, Georgian society was facing diverse political situations and tensions. During this period, Georgia experienced civil war, the Rose Revolution in 2003; and it was only after the 2012 parliamentary elections, that the first peaceful transition of power took place and the government was changed through peaceful and democratic elections. These elections are considered a milestone in the process of advancing electoral culture. In such a strained environment, Georgian people were learning to nurture their demand for more democratic and credible elections. In each of these decades, the electoral processes in independent Georgia were facing different challenges; and still, from election to election, observer noted the improved election environment and the increased trust of electoral stakeholders. This progress is the result of our combined efforts, the lessons learned from past experiences, as well as the support we receive from different electoral stakeholders.

However, all of this would have been impossible without the support of the international community and international organizations that promote the work of the election administration in Georgia. I would like to acknowledge the work of the IFES team in Georgia. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they have provided the foundation for each of our new initiatives. Our collaboration over the years has resulted in plenty of successful projects.

Since 1995, the Georgian electoral environment has benefitted from the support of IFES. Their support covers the areas of election legislation, capacity building of election administration, strengthened advocacy and leadership skills through trainings, inclusiveness, civic and voter education projects, women's political engagement and more.

Here today, I must highlight some of the joint achievements in which IFES holds an important stake in Georgia: the systematic and coordinated approach toward electoral security is one of the most recent accomplishments with IFES. It gave us an opportunity to ensure a more secure environment for voters and more coordinated responses to the security challenges during election periods; facilitation of the process that resulted in a uniform approach and better regulation of the cases related to the misuse of administrative resources. This process is being supported by IFES since 2010 and during these years more civil society organizations and political parties have joined the Memorandum of Understanding signed in this respect. Another positive result of IFES' support is increased youth participation through one of the most popular CEC educational projects "Electoral Development Schools", which engages youth in election processes. This project includes outreach to ethnic minority youth, youth in settlements of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and the region close to the conflict zone. The deliverables of this project are amazing, it gave many youth possibilities not only to get knowledge on election-related issues but also to be employed within election administration. IFES also played an important role in developing new services for persons with disabilities, promoting our election environment to be more inclusive. Their involvement in the process of developing an Electoral Integrity Plan for election administration assisted the CEC to manage and mitigate electoral risks as well as develop effective ways of respond. IFES also actively supported the development of the CEC Gender Equality Policy which made Georgian election administration one of the entities with the most balanced gender representation.

Other successful examples of our partnership with IFES are capacity building for election administration officials; improved Election Dispute Resolution process; and expert assistance in various areas. Thanks to this collaboration, the notion of a better election environment has become reality. IFES has worked in 145 countries, and similar success stories in each country illustrate the great scale of the organization's work promoting democracy worldwide and underlines the significance of its mission.

I would like to express my personal gratitude to IFES President and CEO Mr. Bill Sweeney for being a strong supportive force, to IFES Chief of Party Mr. Nermin Nisic for sharing our challenges for many years, to IFES Georgia Chief of Party Mr. Jerome Leyraud and each person at the IFES office in Georgia and at headquarters in Washington, DC. Their work worldwide has a profound effect and value.

All these efforts lead the Georgian election administration to frequently be named by international organizations as the regional leader in promoting new approaches and policies that are often considered best practices. It makes other election management bodies keen to share and introduces already proven successful projects in their activities. For last 4 years, (since I have chaired the Georgian election administration) we directed our efforts to develop our election management body as a provider of effective services. The biggest emphasis was placed on the inclusiveness of election processes and its transparency; we included educational projects as a main pillar in our strategic plan and promoted large-

scale educational policy. We successfully implemented new technologies for internal management as well as for promoting transparent processes and user-friendly services for voters and other electoral stakeholders. In 2014 we made gender equality a priority and started working in various directions including publishing the statistical data and considering to institutionalize gender policy in all our activities.

This award once again puts an emphasis on the importance of the results we have achieved together with all electoral stakeholders in Georgia. Though it is a personal award, it also goes to each Georgian voter and I want to share this honor with each of them as they made it possible to succeed in every new initiative and to achieve tangible progress.

At each stage of my work, the main source of motivation was the team and the people surrounding me, who were united to deliver better services to voters and advance the election environment. Each tiny step forward was the most powerful stimulus and the driving force, leading us to deliver even more impressive results. I want to thank each person within the election administration of Georgia for their dedication and their coordinated work.

I would also like to thank those people who have been standing with me, my colleagues, friends and my family.

Once again, thank you for this honor. I believe that this recognition will play an important part for my successors and will inspire them to achieve more on the way of building real democracy.