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Summary to Roundtable Discussion

Post-Election Debriefing: the second round of local elections in Georgia

November 3, 2021

The [International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy](#) and the [European Platform for Democratic Elections](#) hosted a roundtable discussion with election observers, journalists, election experts, political stakeholders, and election administrators on the second round of local elections in Georgia, conducted on October 31, 2021. The second round of local elections took place in five self-governing cities and 15 municipalities as well as for 42 majoritarian seats in 24 local councils.¹

Domestic observers agree that the second round of the local elections was technically well administered but the pre-election campaign was marked with negative, sometimes anti-democratic rhetoric. Candidates campaigned intensively, but allegations of intimidation and pressure on voters persisted. The blurred line between the state and the ruling party remained a challenge. Use of administrative resources gave the ruling party the advantage and created an unlevel playing field. On election day, instances of gatherings of persons outside of polling stations, alleged vote buying, voter mobilization and tracking of voters negatively reflected on the expression of the free will of voters; in municipalities where there was a narrow margin between the results of the main contenders, this could have had an influence on the election results. The combination of the above trends adversely affected the process. Regretfully, nearly all the violations and shortcomings reported in the first round still prevailed in the runoffs. Thus, election watchdogs consider that this is a missed opportunity on Georgia's path of democratic development.

Context of the election

On 16 October, the Central Election Commission (CEC) announced the final first round results and called a second round for mayoral elections in five self-governing cities and 15 municipalities as well as for elections of 42 majoritarian members of 24 local councils. In the second round, the ruling party Georgian Dream (GD) took part in all majoritarian and mayoral races. GD candidates were confronted mostly by the United National Movement (UNM) candidates. The official CEC results for the 2021 municipal election run-offs in Georgia show that GD mayoral candidates have won in 19 municipalities, while the opposition contender has won in just one, Tsalenjikha municipality. The difference between the results of the main two contenders was very slim in several big cities of Georgia, including Kutaisi, Zugdidi, and Batumi. Here, the opposition expressed distrust in some aspects of the process which was also demonstrated by a large number of complaints from parties and citizen observer groups as well as recount requests. Statements issued by the EU and US embassies express their hope for a transparent, inclusive and credible recounting of the ballots in some polling stations and fair adjudication of complaints.

Campaigns for the run-offs continued to be offensive and negative. The return and arrest of former President Mikheil Saakashvili had a major influence on the political discourse. Rallies calling for his release and counter-rallies were conducted outside the penitentiary premises. These developments further hardened the political discourse and increased hostility between the contestants. Such adversity made politicians on both sides of the aisle abandon fact-based rhetoric, which makes it harder for journalists to adequately cover the electoral campaign, which became increasingly detached from reality.

¹ <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/c/502704.pdf>



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Compared to the first round where the opposition's entire pre-election campaign messaging was streamlined around the referendum idea,² this time, opposition managed to slightly shift their focus to local issues, the future of cities, and local development. The UNM underlined the importance of coalition politics as a way forward and called on other parties to help defeat the GD through opposition unity. Subsequently, the majority of opposition political parties gathered around opposition candidates and managed to demonstrate some sort of unity and mobilization. The UNM enlisted other opposition parties to form a prospective coalition government for all five self-governing cities.

This prompted the ruling party to declare that “full mobilization” is needed to decisively win the second round. On the level of top management, the **ruling party had advocated an openly anti-democratic political agenda**. On 23 October, the Prime Minister made a statement that any municipality won by the opposition will not be able to implement any projects due to their lack of connections with the central government. This was widely condemned by the opposition and civil society as an attempt to intimidate opposition voters and candidates. Moreover, in their public statements, ruling party representatives openly called for an end to the major opposition party, which won between 42-50% of voter support in the elections, depending on the locality. Experts also note with concern previous statements by the PM, stating that Georgia will no longer be governed by the will of a minority, but that instead the will of the majority shall prevail. This was said in the context of appalling attacks on journalists and LGBT activists back in July. Such negative rhetoric used in the election campaign has been met with harsh criticism by embassies and other international stakeholders. Their pressure, together with domestic civil society, has thus far kept the government committed to democratic principles. However, experts worry that this mechanism is no longer working. International commitments are disregarded, and media and civil society have been increasingly targeted.

Additionally, in the spirit of full mobilization, on October 27, 2021, GD conducted a rally of its supporters. It once again raised concerns of **abuse of office by the ruling party** and **intimidation of public servants** to attend the rally. Obviously, it required a large public resource to conduct such an event, including costs for mobilizing such a large pool of public servants who were transported from all over Georgia to attend the rally. Some public servants confided in domestic long-term observers, expressing that they have been pressured to participate in the event.

Conduct of the election: E-day violations in and outside of the polling stations

According to information received from domestic observers, the election was technically administered in line with the legal requirements. However, **numerous violations and shortcomings** were reported:

- During the voting process, incidents of voting by persons who had already been inked were reported as well as one incident related to a broken ink checking device, raising **concerns about repeated voting**;
- Numerous violations related to **voters' lists and mobile boxes** were also documented. In some cases, either in Tbilisi or outside, some voters discovered that signatures had already been placed on their behalf, or they were not on the list that they should have been on (either the table version of the list or the mobile ballot box list);
- Throughout the day, there were instances of **assaults and pressure targeting domestic observers**, including one case of physical attack in Zugdidi, where the police were called to intervene. Mostly, unauthorized people gathering outside the polling station were pressuring and intimidating observers, restricting their observation rights;

² <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/discussion-summary-assessment-of-the-pre-election-environment.html>



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- **Tracking of voters** inside the polling station by the commission members was problematic. Some commission members were tracking and noting those who showed up to cast their vote. This demonstrated a very worrying tendency of control over the free will of voters at the polling stations;
- A case of **ballot box stuffing** was also reported, signaling that this malign practice has returned to the menu of electoral violations. Ballot box stuffing was reported neither in the first round nor in the previous 2020 parliamentary elections;
- Additionally, there were cases where ballots were incorrectly and/or deliberately invalidated. Observers reported instances of **invalidation of ballot papers** where the voter's choice was clearly depicted.

According to local observers, the **outside perimeters of polling stations remained problematic sites** where voter tracking, intimidation and control of their free will took place:

- ISFED stationed static observers in the outside perimeter of polling stations and reported 4 cases of alleged vote-buying, including 2 cases in Tbilisi and 2 cases in Batumi;
- A **suspicious gathering of people** within a 100-meter perimeter from the polling station (prohibited by the law), was noticed outside of 34 polling stations. In 15 cases, these gatherings took place within the 100-meter range, in 11 cases - beyond the 100-meter range, and in 8 cases - both within and beyond the 100-meter range; Apart from unidentified individuals, there were cases reported when party coordinators were present outside the polling station, tracking voters;
- **Attacks towards journalists** by persons gathered outside of polling stations were also documented. Aggressions occurred towards journalists representing both critical and government TV channels. CSOs documented 90 reports by journalists of being attacked and so far, there have not been any investigations. Transparency International Georgia stated that this is an unprecedented number in the 10 years in which it has been reporting on journalist and media rights in the country. Over the course of the election campaign, it is estimated that 186 journalists' rights were violated.
- Experts also highlighted the worrying trend of **excessive amounts of observers** at the polling stations representing self-declared civil society groups, when in reality they represent political parties' interests, obstruct credible observers, and are engaged in tracking of voters in and outside of the polling station;
- Observers criticize that **law enforcement was inefficient** in ensuring that the law concerning the prohibition of unauthorized persons within the 100-meter perimeter outside of polling stations was being implemented properly. When receiving complaints by observers, they failed to respond to the complaint in several cases.

Takeaways from this election

The combination of the above listed negative trends and reoccurring pitfalls prompted both domestic and international actors not to hesitate to consider these municipal elections as a **missed opportunity for the country's democratic development**. Some international commentators even called this a 'fifth step back' in Georgia's reform steps, which is something that can be seen in both its judicial reform and the general hardening political rhetoric against Georgia's Western commitments.

Concerning the legal framework for elections, one expert commented that "the body is there, but that the brain is dead", meaning that technically the law for conducting democratic elections is there, but that the **way in which the law is being implemented is problematic**. Some experts caution that Georgia is moving beyond the point where things could be improved with legislative amendments and reforms and that there are now much broader concerns of state capture in Georgia that must be dealt with when talking about improving democratic processes in Georgia.



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On a positive note, the **strong standing of civil society** was highlighted which can help form a bulwark against these negative trends and efforts to abolish democratic structures. The **increasingly professional coverage on elections** by independent, mostly smaller online media outlets, was also mentioned as a very positive aspect in Georgia's democratic process. Both civil society watchdogs and journalists work in extremely difficult circumstances and the West must continue supporting them in order to assist Georgia in its democratic development.

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