



ISFED
INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR
FAIR ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY



B | S | T The Black Sea Trust
for Regional Cooperation
A PROJECT OF THE GERMAN MARSHALL FUND

Summary to Roundtable Discussion

Assessment of the Pre-Election Environment in Georgia

September 28, 2021

The [International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy](#), the [European Platform for Democratic Elections](#), and the [Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation](#) hosted a roundtable discussion to assess the pre-election environment in Georgia a few days prior to polling day, scheduled for October 2, 2021. The upcoming local elections have attracted more attention than any other previous municipal election ever has. There is a broad consensus that these elections will serve as a litmus test for Georgia's democratic progress and future Euro-Atlantic orientation, and will greatly determine whether the authoritarian tendencies will be strengthened or muted.

The political opposition frames these elections as a referendum, determining the prospect of early parliamentary elections. On the other hand, the ruling party maintains that it will win far more than necessary to celebrate its ultimate victory. The notion of the referendum comes from the EU-negotiated agreement between the ruling *Georgian Dream* party and the political opposition following the political crisis last spring. According to the agreement, the ruling party must clear 43 percent of the vote in order to avoid early national parliamentary elections. Although the *Georgian Dream* has since reneged on the agreement, it remains in force for the other signatories. Thus, opposition parties have capitalized on this promise and have developed their strategy by framing the local elections as a referendum.

The vague prospect of early parliamentary elections has tightened the political race and deepened persisting political polarization, which has greatly impacted the pre-election environment. Participants agree that the electoral campaign has rarely been issue-based in Georgia, but this time electoral discourse is extraordinarily and notably deprived of meaningful debate on the issues that concern Georgian society, especially in the regions. Experts also underline that despite pluralism, the [media landscape](#) mirrors the existing political polarization, which prevents voters from receiving clear information about the political choices placed in front of them.

Against this backdrop, recent polls show that Georgian citizens are seeking a party or candidates with a political platform aiming to address socio-economic issues. In the polarized and personality-driven electoral campaign, this opens a small window of opportunity for political parties to campaign on local issues. Experts note that the recently emerged party of former Prime Minister, Giorgi Gakharia has been trying to stay disengaged from the accusatory discourse between the *Georgian Dream* and *United National Movement*. Instead, his party has essentially stuck to the issues in their campaign and remained fairly disciplined in their messaging. Recent opinion polls also show that *For Georgia* party is on the rise at the expense of declining support for the ruling *Georgian Dream*, which somewhat explains why the *Georgian Dream* has chosen an utterly negative campaign against the other party's leader and in general also against its other opponents.

Due to extraordinarily high stakes, international and local organizations have assembled their monitoring and assessment missions to offer their conclusions about the conduct of elections. Although experts agree that it is impossible to measure the exact impact of the pre-election environment on the election outcomes, they do agree that the pre-election environment does shape the election outcome. Thus, the presence of international missions on the ground is critical.

The pre-election environment in Georgia has been marked by abuse of administrative resources, voter



intimidation and pressure, discrediting campaigns against media and civil society, hostile political discourse, and anonymous discrediting campaigns in social media.

Misuse of Administrative Resources

- Watchdogs see the signs of the use of administrative resources for partisan purposes, in favor of the ruling party candidates. Covid-19 gave an additional competitive advantage to the ruling party. Justified by the socio-economic hardship exacerbated by the pandemic, the ruling party has launched social programs. One of the most illustrative examples was the waiver of some GEL 76 million (USD 24 million) worth of accrued unpaid fines for violating COVID-19 related restrictions. Although it was offered prior to the official kick-off of the pre-election campaign, it was still very close to the election day and thus shall be registered as misuse of administrative resources for electoral gain. Such precedents further blur the line between the government and the ruling party.
- On the other hand, the pre-election campaign is marked by the intense engagement of public servants in electoral agitation throughout Georgia. Georgian legislation doesn't allow public servants paid through the state budget to engage in the election campaign of a political party. However, monitoring organizations note their participation in illegal electoral agitation, especially on social media.

Voter Intimidation and Pressure

- The pre-election campaign has been marked by widespread dismissals of public servants on political grounds, which creates an intimidating environment and encourages, at the very least, extreme politicization of the public service. Pressure and dismissals of those employed at public schools, at local self-government bodies, or elsewhere, who joined or openly supported the former PM Gakharia's political party, have been registered too. Some appeals are already submitted to court concerning the allegedly politically motivated dismissals. Moreover, local monitoring missions also report about instances where even the candidates of the *For Georgia* party were pressured, resulting in them dropping out of the election halfway through the campaign period.
- Pursuant to the old and malign practice, watchdogs notice the intimidation and pressure of public-school principals to get engaged in the electoral campaign in favor of the ruling party. Reportedly, there are cases of dismissals on political grounds of those principals who did not obey campaign instructions.
- Watchdogs share further reports about local government and security service representatives putting pressure on businessmen to donate for the ruling party, total amount relating to this is around one million Georgian Lari. For many, it somewhat explains why they have observed several times higher donations to the ruling party compared to all the other opposition parties together.
- Additionally, cases of physical confrontation and violence further exacerbate the already intimidating electoral environment and pressure on the voters.

Discreditation and Hostility in the Election Campaign

- Campaign monitors reported about the capital-city-wide appearance of banners depicting media managers and opposition politicians on a bloody backdrop. A local watchdog organization has already appealed to the Central Election Commission and the Audit Office to investigate and respond to the case within their discretion. Such negative campaigning encourages violence against

the opponents and normalizes hate speech, which undoubtedly creates a pressurized and intimidating environment for Georgian voters.

- COVID-19 has prompted the political parties' more intensive use of social media to reach out to their constituents. Although political parties run neat campaigns through their official social media channels, anonymous pages openly spread disinformation and strongly support or discredit certain parties. The number of discrediting posts against the *Georgian Dream* is higher, but the posts against the opposition enjoy a higher engagement, indicating that they are better planned and organized.

Attacks on Media and Civil Society

- An increasingly high level of aggression towards journalists and media representatives is a unique feature of these elections. Journalists have become the targets of discrediting campaigns. Cases of violence against journalists while performing their duties also showed signs of illegal interference in the work of media. Experts don't rule out the possibility of journalists being attacked on polling day as well since the perpetrators of violent assaults against them on July 5 remain unpunished.
- Local watchdogs are also concerned with emerging attempts to discredit the local independent civil society organizations with election monitoring mandates. They assume that these discreditation attempts intend to undermine their credibility in the eyes of the public so that their critical assessments aren't trusted and public confidence in their work is undermined.

Composition of Election Commissions

- The recent reform of the Election Code didn't manage to fully address the persisting issue of the fair composition of the election administration on any level. It is noteworthy that not all authorized parties were able to utilize their quotas for appointing members to the precinct commissions. Subsequently, district election commissions (DECs) announced competitions to fill up to 17 commission members on precinct levels, resulting in a disparity in the number of professional and party-appointed members in some precincts. Considering that the selection of professional members of the commission is often based on their loyalty to the ruling party, the ruling party has clearly increased its influence on some precincts.

The great significance of these elections for Georgia is clear. Many agree that runoffs are expected in quite a few electoral districts. International and local monitoring missions will watch the polling day very closely and hope for peaceful developments in the following days.

This series of events is made possible thanks to the financial support of the Federal Foreign Office of Germany, the European Union, and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).