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FAIR ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY



Summary to Roundtable Discussion

Preliminary assessment of the first round of local elections in Georgia

October 7, 2021

The [International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy](#) and the [European Platform for Democratic Elections](#) hosted a roundtable discussion with domestic and international election observers, election experts, political stakeholders, and election administrators on the first round of local elections in Georgia. These elections carried more significance than local elections usually do as they were hoped to bring an end to a long period of political crisis in Georgia. The pre-election period really defined these elections and was marked with high political polarization and instances of pressure and intimidation of both candidates and voters, which carried into the Election Day in the form of voters being influenced outside of polling stations on how to vote. The administration of the election was generally good with some procedural violations and the legal framework generally allows for a democratic election process, but lack of political will is still an issue to ensure that the legal framework is implemented in good faith.

Context of the election

These elections were significant for Georgia to try and come out of its political crisis which it has been in since the 2020 parliamentary elections, after which the opposition boycotted the parliament. The political landscape in Georgia has been rather bipolar and the opposition has been moving away from state institutions due to feeling that these are dominated by the ruling party. With these elections it was hoped that there will be more political pluralism in Georgia. However, results show that the dominant position of the two major parties, *Georgian Dream* and *United National Movement (UNM)*, still remains and that the third force, *For Georgia*, failed to really challenge this position. This could be attributed to the highly polarized election campaign fought between the two major contestants.

The new electoral system¹ does allow for more smaller parties to compete in elections, but they then have to campaign under very difficult conditions. This is due to the unequal financial means between parties to conduct their campaigns and the very strong advantage of the ruling party, which was particularly strong during this ‘pandemic election’, to the point that there was a blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state.² Biased media in Georgia that oftentimes represents the interests of their owners additionally creates an unlevel playing field which makes it more difficult for smaller parties to receive broader media coverage and bring their message to the voter.³

Conduct of the election

In many respects, these elections went as well as previous elections on the Election Day. Procedures were generally followed with some violations recorded. However, many concerns raised in the past were still the same: pressure on voters, abuse of administrative resources, mismatch of resources for campaigning, a **problematic pre-election period**.⁴ The latter really defined the election, as issues during this period carried

¹ An analysis of the legal framework for this election available here <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/local-elections-in-georgia-and-the-existing-legal-and-political-framework.html>.

² For more details about the ruling party’s advantage during this ‘pandemic election’, see our discussion summary on the topic here <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/election-campaign-amid-the-pandemic.html>.

³ The issue of the media landscape in Georgia was discussed in a recent public event, a discussion summary and recording of the event is available here <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/discussion-summary-electoral-discourse-ahead-of-georgias-local-elections.html>.

⁴ For further details on the pre-election period see our discussion summary on this topic here <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/discussion-summary-assessment-of-the-pre-election-environment.html> or the



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forward into the Election Day. There were instances of political pressure and forced dismissals during the pre-election period which have not been investigated by the relevant state authorities and observers noted that it is impossible to measure the extent to which this pressure may have influenced voter behavior on Election Day and the election results, but that it did create a certain tense environment for voters.

Domestic and international election observation missions reported on the **problematic situation outside of polling stations**, where cases of voter mobilization, tracking/noting of voters, and alleged vote buying were observed. In more than 30% of the observed perimeters of polling stations (both within and without the 100-meter perimeter where campaigning and unauthorized persons are prohibited), domestic observers reported the controlling of voters. Sometimes this was observed from party coordinators, supporters or activists, but also from unknown NGOs who neither have a history of nor a proper methodology for conducting election observation and for which it is clear that a party stands behind this NGO. Unfortunately, the Central Election Commission (CEC) was not able to properly verify such dubious observers in the course of the accreditation process.

Observers could not quantify the scale of this phenomenon in comparison to previous elections since static observation of the vicinity of the polling stations was not part of the observation methodology of domestic observers during previous elections and was newly introduced for this election. However, because the environment inside polling stations has become increasingly controlled over the past years, observers commented that these practices have been pushed to the outside of polling stations.

Domestic observers also reported cases of being verbally harassed and one case where an observer was intimidated, which occurred especially outside of polling stations by persons involved in controlling voters, who attempted to obstruct the work of domestic observers. International observers voiced concern over observed attempts to discredit the findings of credible domestic observer organizations.

Election administration

Confidence in the performance of election commissions is still an issue. The renewed composition of the CEC and the increase in the number of members appointed by political parties have led to more transparent and meaningful discussions at commission meetings. However, with a fragmented political scene, maintaining balanced political party representation on election commissions can lead to bloated structures and reduced efficiency in their operation. These increases in commission members on each level from 12 to 17 members has also led to a huge number of persons that now have to undergo training. The participation rate in trainings was not very good, which meant that on Election Day, precinct election commission (PEC) members were not equipped with the necessary knowledge and skill to carry out their job. Experts commented that having fewer but better qualified commission members could help create a less chaotic environment in polling stations and allow for a smoother running of elections, with fewer mistakes done in election procedures. Increasing the salary of these people⁵ and introducing systematic training could help tackle the competency issues and new technologies could assist in reducing the size of commissions.

Other experts noted, however, that the need to increase the number of commission members came from the lack of trust between political parties and that decreasing the number of commission members may actually worsen the situation if political trust is not improved first. If there are electoral complaints and parties do not have their members in commissions, this may lead to election results not being trusted.

joint assessment of ISFED, Transparency International Georgia, and The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics here <https://www.isfed.ge/eng/angarishebi/saqartvelos-munitsipalitetis-organota-2021-tslis-archevnebis-tsinasaarchevno-garemos-ertoblivi-shefaseba>.

⁵ Currently, PEC members receive approx. 70 dollars a month during their period of appointment.

Election disputes

Domestic observers from the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) have filed 400 complaints and requested recounts in 126 polling stations where misbalances in the number of voter signatures and cast ballots in ballot boxes or a high number of invalid ballots were recorded. It will be important to see how the CEC responds to these electoral complaints filed by domestic election observers. The extent to which these concerns are heard is an important yardstick to judge these elections. UPDATE: After this discussion, the CEC recommend on 9 October to the DEC to recount the results of the PECs where the number of invalid ballot papers is high, where complaints were submitted by the observer organizations, and / or the protocols revealed more imbalances, [reports ISFED](#).

What's next?

Second rounds of elections will take place in several municipalities on the 30th of October and observers strongly hope to not see the same type of pressure on voters and candidates in the pre-election environment or any controlling of the free will of the voters. The second round will show and prove if there is an improved election process, but the first round so far cannot be seen as a “positive election” following international best practices. The free will of the voter is the main priority, other technicalities follow that when judging the conduct of an election.

Some experts voiced concerns over what might happen in the next month. Even though several smaller parties did better in these elections than in previous ones, there are fears that there will be a return to the traditional struggle between the two major parties *Georgian Dream* and UNM, which does not bode well for a stable and peaceful process. When the ultimate result is declared, there is a risk that this will cause upset among some parties and may bring out their worst tendencies.

Preliminary recommendations and conclusions

In general, experts note that the legal framework for the municipal elections could ensure the holding of adequate democratic elections, but that implementation and lack of political will still remain to be an issue. Some experts also believe that legislation concerning Election Day procedures is still unnecessarily complex and could benefit from simplification. Any reforms should occur in an all-inclusive manner with all political and international stakeholders involved and all political parties participating in the vote on the reform. This, however, also requires political will to change, and so far, political parties have been reluctant to do so out of fear that the changes could be used for political purposes.

Concerning the problematic situation outside of polling stations, observers have called on relevant authorities to address this issue at least within the 100-meter perimeter outside of polling stations, which will improve the situation at least in the vicinity of polling stations already before the upcoming second round elections, even if it will not solve the problem entirely. This issue, among others, requires a change in political culture in Georgia, which necessitates much more work beyond the traditional technical support that has been provided, commented an international participant.

For detailed reports about the conduct of the Election Day, please see the reports of following election observation missions:

- International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) – [Parallel vote tabulation and preliminary assessment](#).
- OSCE ODIHR – [Preliminary statement](#).
- European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO) – [Preliminary statement](#).

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