

The 2020 Georgian Parliamentary Elections

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Introduction

Georgia will head to the polls on October 31 to elect a new parliament. These elections will decide the next Prime Minister of Georgia and will have important regional implications.

Georgia is strategically located in the South Caucasus region and borders Turkey, a NATO country and Russia. Besides, it is the main transit country for energy, transport and trade between Azerbaijan and Turkey. Therefore, it plays a key role in European energy security and transport routes, for example, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, from Asia to Europe. Georgia has access to the Black Sea and the country is currently seeking to build up its Black Sea infrastructure and ports to boost economic development.

The country suffers from a long-standing separatist movement in its Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. These regions broke away from Tbilisi and declared de-facto independence after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. Currently, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia host Russian military forces and the elections

will not be held in these regions. In addition to internal issues, Georgia borders Armenia and Azerbaijan, which are currently engaged in a military confrontation over the Armenian occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region.

66 parties are running for a total of 150 seats in the Georgian Parliament. The opposition is hopeful after important amendments were made to the electoral law in mid-2020. However, the Georgian Dream party continues to dominate national politics and has recently increased its domestic popularity because of the strict control of the pandemic crisis. As it is likely that the election will result in a coalition government, knowing whom the next Prime Minister will be remains uncertain.

This info pack provides an overview of the Georgian political system alongside the major issues in Georgian politics. In addition, the info pack supplies detailed information about the candidates for Prime Minister. Lastly, comments about the latest opinion polls along expert assessments are also included.



(Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

Overview of Georgia's Political System

- A parliamentary representative democratic republic
- Multi-party system
- Executive system – The president and the government
- Legislative power – The government and the parliament
- Georgia got rid of widespread corruption thanks to the reforms in media, the judiciary and the police force in the mid-2000s. However, Georgia is still struggling to transform into a full democracy. The country has also suffered from separatism and occupation. In 2019, [the Economist Intelligence Unit](#) labelled Georgia as a “hybrid regime”¹ and the country ranks 84th in the Democracy Index, which implies that there are irregularities in elections that prevent free and fair electoral decisions.
- A system built on personalities, their hegemony over political blocs, and a pro-Western orientation of most major political groups. Pro-Russian groups in politics largely declined after the 2008 war. Currently, pro-Russian parties have a support base of approximately 4-5 per cent.
- A highly centralised state except for autonomous territories and occupied regions.
- Even though Abkhazia and South Ossetia were autonomous during the Soviet Period, Georgia did not recognise their autonomy following independence. Separatist movements in the region are supported by Moscow and their activities peaked in 2008, resulting in the Russian-Georgian War. Following the defeat of Georgian forces, the regions have acquired a de facto independent status and continue to place host to Russian forces.
- The president is elected for a term of five years and rules as the head of the state. However, the prime minister is the head of the government and holds more executive relative to the mostly-symbolic powers of the president. The president appoints the prime minister. The current president is Salome Zourabichvili who ran as an independent candidate, while Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia represents the leading party ‘Georgian Dream’.
- The Georgian parliament - *sakartvelos p'arlament'i* – has 150 members who are elected for four years based on universal suffrage.



The Georgian Parliament (Republic of Georgia - Anadolu Agency)

¹ The Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index listed Georgia as a “hybrid regime”, scoring lower than full and flawed democracies while scoring higher than authoritarian regimes across various categories of democratic and social freedoms. Hybrid regimes have irregularities in their elections which prevent political life from being fully fair and free.

Historical Background of Contemporary Georgian Politics

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, student movements, strikes and mass rallies triggered an independence movement in Georgia. Similar to the Solidarity movement in Poland and under the influence of Gorbachev's perestroika, Georgians forced the local communist party to hold multiparty elections. The first democratic parliamentary elections that took place on 28 October 1990 resulted in a victory of Round Table/Free Georgia supporters over the communists and opened the way for a new era in Georgia.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a popular political figure who long-suffered from communist pressure for many years became the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Georgia and held an independence referendum without delay. After the declaration of independence in April 1991, Gamsakhurdia was also elected as the first president of the country on 26 May 1991. He was a fierce anti-Russian and refused to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)². His semi-authoritarian and nationalist government faced a violent coup which resulted in Gamsakhurdia's escape from Georgia in 1992. He was assassinated a year later by an unknown perpetrator.

The forces who forced Gamsakhurdia out of his position invited an ex-communist and popular figure Eduard Shevardnadze who held the previously held the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union. He tried to ease the authoritarian shape of the state formed under his predecessor and tried to moderate the approach to domestic political figures, particularly in the breakaway region of Abkhazia. However, the violent clashes in Abkhazia peaked in 1992 after Tbilisi sent in the army to crush separatist activities. The separatists achieved a decisive victory over government forces with the alleged backing of Russia and [expelled](#) the Georgian population from the region in 1993. Clashes occurred in South Ossetia as well where almost 100,000 refugees fled to Russia after clashes left the region in ruins. Another autonomous region, Adjara, fell under the personal power of Aslan Abashidze amidst instability in Georgia. Abashidze used the power vacuum in the country to establish a personal army, which guaranteed security in Adjara as pro and anti-Gamsakhurdia forces clashed. Shevardnadze's de facto control of Adjara facilitated the enclave's semi-autonomous status and helped avert a new civil war. Abashidze's regime became

autonomous and refused to contribute the common budget of the country along raising autonomous military forces in Adjara until 2004.

The instability in the time of Gamsakhurdia did not immediately disappear in the early years of Shevardnadze. Besides clashes in breakaway regions, the regime in Adjara and thousands of IDPs, Tbilisi faced a new wave of insurgency in domestic politics. Like his predecessor, Shevardnadze also faced a coup attempt in 1993 where the price of him holding his position was to make the country a member to the CIS. Along with political upheavals, which included a failed assassination attempt against Shevardnadze, the country was becoming a battleground between rival organised crime organisations. Despite this, Shevardnadze ultimately triumphed in both the 1995 and 2000 elections with large majorities. However, these elections were cast in doubt by accusations of vote-rigging, corruption and forced voting.

Shevardnadze did not completely tie Georgia to Moscow. During his presidency, Georgia hosted Chechen insurgents who were fighting against the Russian government, leading to a major diplomatic crisis. Furthermore, during the Shevardnadze era, Georgia became closer to the US and hosted NATO training missions. The ambition to join both NATO and the EU became prominent during the early 2000s. Georgia also became one of the major trade and infrastructure partners of Turkey, which made the country an important player in the region by becoming a transit country for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. As a transit country between Azerbaijan and Turkey, Georgia has benefitted economically and politically over the last two decades thanks to Shevardnadze's earlier rapprochement with the West.

The 2003 parliamentary elections not only changed the political fate of Georgia but also shook the post-Soviet establishment in the region by giving the first example of a democratic handover of power. The young reformers, Mikhail Saakashvili and Zurab Zhvania created a united progressive front to end Shevardnadze's reign. The legitimacy of the 2003 elections was rejected by the West and massive protests against the allegedly rigged elections occurred in capital Tbilisi. Two weeks of demonstrations

² The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was founded to maintain relations between post-Soviet states and help them to transform into independent states. The organisation still exists with 10 members and is often accused of being under the total control of Moscow.

ended with the resignation of the president in a process that became known as the 'Rose Revolution'. It was a major part of the so-called 'Colour Revolutions' in post-Soviet Europe where protestors succeeded in toppling long-standing political figures in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan but not in Azerbaijan.

Saakashvili's National Movement – Democrats (NMD) won a majority in parliament in March 2004, and he became president the following January with 96% of total votes. His first actions were to strengthen his position, acquiring power to dismiss parliament and appointing his ally Zhvania as prime minister.

The new government took on the burden of a failing state with more than 230,000 IDPs, a corrupt bureaucratic system and dysfunctional military. The economy was in ruins and the country was witnessing major brain drain. Saakashvili aimed to create a democratic state and redesign the whole political picture of the country. This required highly centralised power to restructure the bureaucracy. However, Georgia was still dealing with a very fragile peace in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Saakashvili succeeded in forcing Abashidze out of Adjara after the 2004 Adjara crisis, which strengthened hands of Tbilisi. In this environment, Georgia undertook reforms to reduce corruption, increase transparency in state bodies and empower democracy.

In Saakashvili's first term, relations with Russia remained unstable. Tbilisi continued to show interest in regaining its power in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russian troops remained the disputed regions and clashes occurred between separatists and government forces from time to time. During this period, Tbilisi became closer with NATO and besides approving the Individual Partnership Action Plan³. Georgia also supported the US-led coalition in the Iraq War as a part of the government's long term plan to become a part of NATO. Ongoing problems such as unemployment, pensions and separatism in Abkhazia decreased the popularity of the government. Relations with Russia worsened in 2006 and Tbilisi once again witnessed anti-government protests in 2007 which were allegedly being funded by pro-Russian businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili.

Tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi peaked between 2008 and 2010. It started with the Georgian attempt to end the separatist movement in South Ossetia by sending troops to crush the insurgents, which initially failed. In response, the Russian army used overwhelming force and



The two most important figures in Georgian politics in the last decade: Mikhail Saakashvili (on the left) and Bidzina Ivanishvili (on the right)
(EPA - Anadolu Agency)

destroyed almost all of the Georgian Air Force. Using the speed of the ground and air forces, Russians [wiped out Georgian villages](#) and launched airstrikes against Tbilisi. As a result of Russian military superiority and heavy Georgian losses, a ceasefire agreement was struck and Abkhazia along with South Ossetia declared their de-facto independence. Georgia, along with many international organisations such as the OSCE and the UN, considered this act of illegal Russian military-backed declaration of independence as an aggression and Russian occupation.

The humiliating defeat and the entrance of the famous Georgian businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili to politics marked an end of the Saakashvili era. The Georgian Dream movement of Ivanishvili defeated Saakashvili's party in the parliamentary elections of 2012. In 2013, the candidate of the Georgian Dream, Giorgi Margvelashvili, won the presidential elections. However, his powers became limited under the new constitution in which the prime minister became the main executive actor. In 2018, despite running as an independent, Salomé Zourabichvili received strong support from the Georgian Dream movement and was elected as Georgia's first female president. For the last decade, the Georgian Dream has dominated both the parliament and the presidency while Mikhail Saakashvili remains in exile and currently serving the Ukrainian government by helping reform processes to strengthen democratic practices in the country.

³ Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAP) is a communication and partnership framework between NATO and various countries. IPAP was the result of the 2002 NATO Prague Summit and Georgia became the first country to ratify the plan on 29 October 2004.

Georgia's Electoral Framework: The 2020 Electoral Reforms

In 2019, Georgia witnessed country-wide protests against the government, which served the political dominance of the Georgian Dream. The gatherings were peaceful and concentrated in Tbilisi where students were one of the main organisers. The protests were sparked by parliament's refusal to adopt a fully proportional electoral system for the general elections held on 24 November 2019. During the summer of 2019, in the early stages of the protests, Ivanishvili promised the protesters that the country would adopt a proportional election system in the upcoming voting for the parliament. As a proportional system would strengthen the opposition, at the very last minute, some MPs from Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream rejected the proposal, triggering further protests.

Before the changes, parliamentary elections in Georgia were held with a mixed electoral system. Out of 150 deputies, 77 were elected on party lists, and 73 deputies were elected by the majority system (from 73 majoritarian constituencies in Georgia). On election day, voters were provided with two ballots - one for party lists (proportional system); the second ballot paper indicates the names of candidates from a particular constituency (one person from each party). As a result, the mandates obtained by the parties under the proportional and majority systems were mechanically combined. For example, if a party won the proportional portion of the election with 40 per cent of the vote (about 30 seats in parliament) and 50 seats out of 73 majoritarian constituencies, the party would have secured 80 seats in parliament.

The system was beneficial for the party in power. For example, Georgian Dream received 48.6 per cent of the total vote, which in the proportional system translated to 73 out of the total 150 seats. However, the party in power occupied 115 seats thanks to the majority system and obtained a constitutional majority in the parliament⁴. The former system was also creating a dominance of a single powerful party in the parliament which was sometimes opposed by a single opposition party. The candidates that were elected by the majority system were successful mostly because of personal influence, rather than that of the party. Therefore, the parties were using popular figures such as sportsmen or singers to gain votes in majoritarian constituencies.

Statistics showed that the majoritarian mandated deputies were more passive lawmakers compared to the proportionally elected deputies. According to a survey published by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) on January 30, 2019, only 28 per cent of respondents know who the majoritarian MP from their constituency was. In other words, 71 per cent of the Georgian population did not know who represented them. The MPs elected from the majoritarian constituencies were also alleged of being complicit in corruption and exploitation of the mandate for personal gain.

On 8 March 2020, foreign diplomats in Tbilisi worked with the government and opposition to broker a deal on electoral reform. The new electoral law passed in June 2020. According to the amendments, 120 deputies will be elected to the new parliament on party lists, and 30 deputies in majoritarian constituencies. It significantly limits the power and influence of majoritarian candidates and transforms the electoral process to a more transparent one. Furthermore, the election threshold decreased to 1 per cent from 5 per cent, which will create a more diverse parliament and eliminate previously dominant single/two-party system. According to the new law, parties with less than 40 per cent of the popular vote cannot form a one-party government. The majoritarian candidates will be eliminated for the 2024 elections, which will be solely based on the proportional system.



Protests in Tbilisi during the summer of 2019 were focused on election reform.
(Davit Kachkachishvili - Anadolu Agency)

⁴ Any party holding a two-thirds of majority in the parliament has the mandate to amend and change the constitution. In the last general election, the Georgian Dream secured 115 seats out of 150 total which granted the constitutional majority to the party.

2020 General Elections

The tenth convocation of the Georgian Parliament will be elected on 31 October 2020. The winner of the election will remain in power until 2024. According to the new law, this will be the last election of the mixed proportional and majoritarian system.

Georgian Dream has the chance to become the first party in Georgia to win three consecutive victories and continue their eight years of rule. On the other hand, the decrease in the electoral threshold to 1 per cent will allow smaller parties and groups to be represented in the parliament. This will diminish the power of the Georgian Dream and may also force the big parties to form new coalitions. If no political party reaches over 40 per cent of the popular vote, a new search for coalition allies may ensue. However, there will still be 30 seats for the majoritarian candidates, which may help Georgian Dream to hold onto power.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also impacted the election process. The Georgian Dream government was initially praised for pandemic mitigation strategies in the early stages of the pandemic. However, by the end of summer

and the beginning of September, Georgia witnessed over 200 new confirmed infections per day, which raised the alert status in the country and disrupted the pre-election activities. The government is firmly standing behind the date of the election despite the pandemic. The pandemic and its economic consequences will undoubtedly be one of the main factors for voters when they head to the polls.

Georgian Dream has witnessed significant improvements to its reputation in the course of the pandemic. While the party was holding onto 20 per cent of support prior to the pandemic, the government's initial pandemic response led to a rise in their popularity to 38 per cent. The leaders of the Georgian Dream believe that at least 60 per cent of the electorate will support the party in the upcoming elections. However, more recently their popularity has slipped due to a worsening Covid-19 situation in the country. Furthermore, as Georgian Dream has built their election rhetoric on the failures of the opposition and anti-Saakashvili sentiment once again, it may backfire if the opposition unifies against the Georgian Dream and cooperates in the elections.

Russian-Occupied Territory in Georgia



Source: Heritage Foundation Research



(Davit Kachkachishvili - Anadolu Agency)

For its part, the opposition is in turmoil and has problems in creating an electoral alliance. The United National Movement (UNM) of Saakashvili is still the most popular opposition force. They have a loyal base of around 15 per cent of the electorate but have largely failed to increase their voter base. On 7 September 2020, the UNM proposed Saakashvili for the position of prime minister. Saakashvili is facing several legal cases in Georgia, which may lead to his arrest if he returns the country. Therefore, the former president in exile, who lost his Georgian citizenship after getting a Ukrainian passport⁵, bidding for the top position in Georgia seems politically impossible. Furthermore, even if he returns, it will likely result in political confrontation and may lead to instability among the opposition front. Saakashvili is also aware of the potential risks of his return after seven years in exile. Furthermore, according to the Georgian constitution, the fact that Saakashvili is not a Georgian citizen would render his candidacy invalid.

Moreover, the second strongest opposition force, European Georgia, was formed by former UNM members who do not want to see Saakashvili's return. Their liberal and Western-oriented approach proposes an alternative way to European integration, which strictly differs from Saakashvili's authoritarian methods. Another party, Lelo, has been formed by the two businessmen who have the problems with the government's TBC Bank takeover. The left-wing Labour Party and right-wing Girchi Party will

seek to take advantage of the new law that allows parties with less than five per cent support to enter parliament. A strong anti-Georgian Dream sentiment unifies the opposition despite their differences. The opposition has declared that they are open to the coalitions and will not compete in certain seats to protect fellow opposition members against Georgian Dream candidates. Before the elections, European Georgia, the UNM, the Labour Party, and New Georgia allied and declared a joint list of specific six candidates for Tbilisi. 31 out of total 66 political parties have formed a political alliance to oppose Georgian Dream with promises of developing the economy and reforming the judicial system. The Lelo Party did not commit to any of the alliances. For its part, the Girchi Party organised a lottery for Tesla cars to increase the turnout in the election day.

The only notable opposition party that has not formed any kind of alliance with fellow opposition parties is the Alliance of Patriots. They are allegedly funded by Moscow and known for their pro-Russian positions. Their campaign is mainly built on the anti-Western and anti-Turkish rhetoric. The Alliance of Patriots claims that Turkey is actively interested in Adjara's independence and that Georgians should be unified to protect its sovereignty. However, when it comes to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they have remained silent. Furthermore, the US Embassy in Tbilisi also expressed their concern over the possibility of Russian interference in parliamentary elections.

⁵ After Saakashvili supported the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution, he was called by newly elected Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to become Governor of Odesa. This was the first time Saakashvili got the Ukrainian passport which forced him to renounce his Georgian citizenship under Georgian restrictions on dual citizenship. In 2016, he parted ways apart from Poroshenko and a year later Ukraine cancelled his passport, making Saakashvili officially a stateless person. He returned to Ukraine in 2019 to help the new president Zelenskyy in the reform process. He is also a holder of Dutch permanent residence due to his wife's nationality.

Main Candidates for Prime Minister

The prime minister of Georgia strengthened his position after 2013, becoming the head of the government and the chief executive. The prime minister controls the actions of the cabinet and represents Georgia in the international environment. The party or coalition that wins enough seats to form a government proposes the candidate for the posi-

tion of prime minister to Parliament for approval. The president officially appoints the prime minister. Currently, the Georgian government is led by Giorgi Gakharia, a former businessman and one of the strong figures of the party in power, the Georgian Dream.



Giorgi Gakharia (45)

- Incumbent prime minister and the candidate of Georgian Dream
- Backed by the most powerful businessman in Georgia and leader of Georgian Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili
- Educated in Tbilisi and Moscow, historian and political scientist by training
- Had a business career until 2013 and later served as a minister in Georgian Dream governments
- Resigned from the position of the Minister of Interior after the violent crackdown over protesters in 2019. Later became prime minister



Mikheil Saakashvili (52)

- Currently serving as the Head of National Reform Council in Ukraine.
- His candidacy is proposed by the UNM. However, constitutionally he cannot be a candidate due to his citizenship.
- He served as the 3rd president of Georgia. During his tenure the country witnessed major reforms in the judiciary and police, as well as in political life, leading to a significant reduction in corruption.
- Has strong ties with the US and the EU
- Currently facing several criminal charges in Georgia, which makes his return to the country difficult.



David Bakradze (48)

- Chairman of European Georgia and former Chairman of the Parliament.
- Served as a minister in various ministries and holds a diplomatic rank
- He was the Chief Negotiator during the Abkhazian and South Ossetian crises in 2008.
- As a former UNM frontrunner, he formed his new party in 2017, targeting liberals and pro-Western voters.
- Currently, a favourite candidate for prime minister if Georgian Dream loses power



Giorgi Vashadze (39)

- Leader of the New Georgia Party and former Deputy Minister of Justice.
- An alumnus of Harvard Business School and former MP
- Led reforms of the public administration of Georgia and introduced electronic systems to simplify the bureaucracy
- A former UNM frontrunner, he formed a new party in 2016 and promises functional e-government institutions to rid the bureaucracy of corruption.



Grigol Vashadze (62)

- The current leader of the UNM and former Minister of Foreign Affairs.
- Experienced diplomat, served in Soviet diplomatic missions.
- Served in the Georgian bureaucracy since 2008.
- Lost 2018 presidential election by just one percentage point.
- Supports Georgian integration with NATO and the EU.
- Vashadze is fluent in Russian, English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and French
- Became a political target in 2008, the year of the Russian-Georgian war, because of his dual Georgian and Russian citizenship. As the Foreign Minister of a country that fighting against Russia, his refusal to renounce his Russian citizenship created a political scandal at home. After a political scandal and heavy accusation by the opposition, he renounced his Russian citizenship.

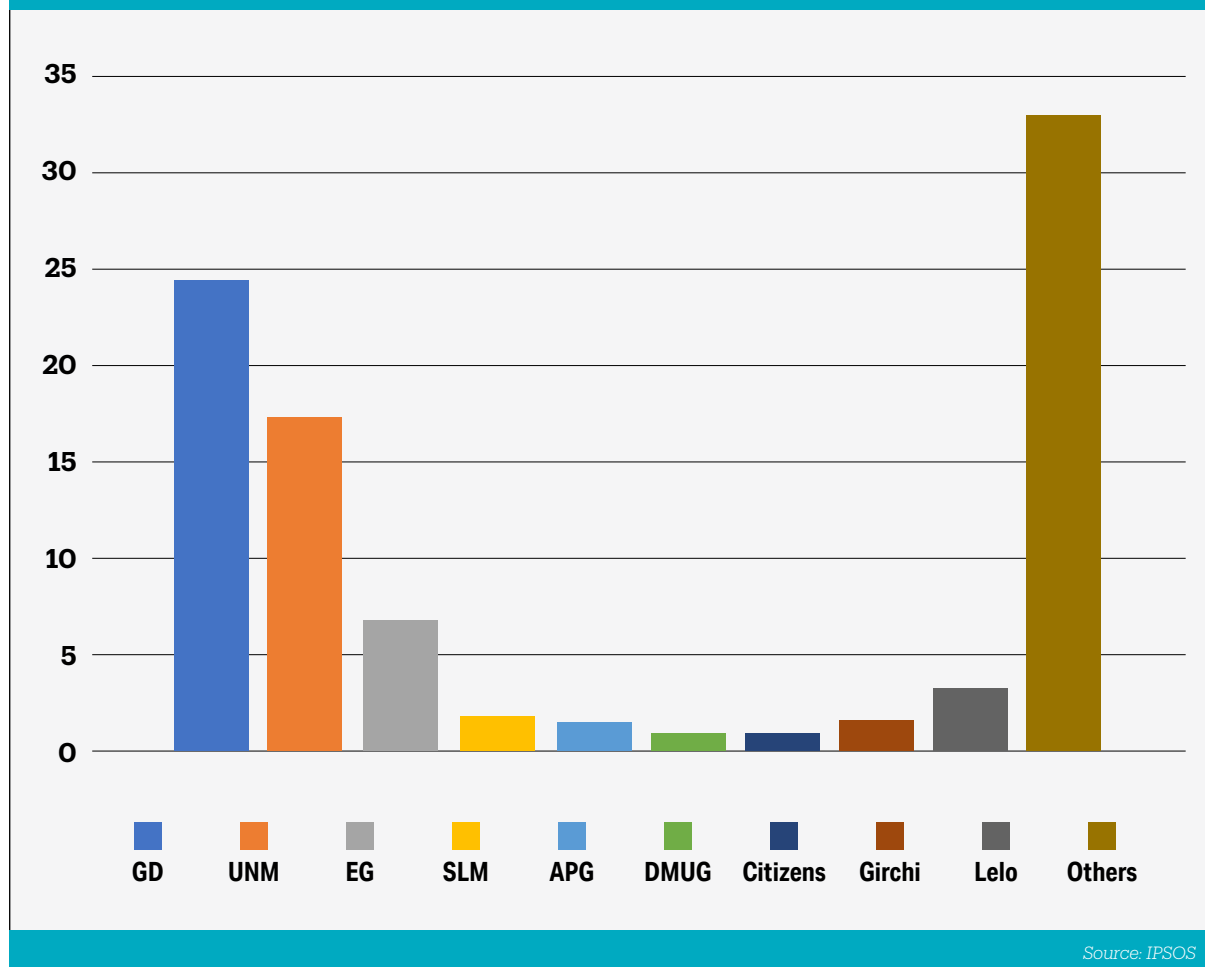
Opinion Polling for the 2020 Georgian Parliamentary Election

Eleven different major polls were taken during 2020. Georgian Dream was leading in all of the polls while the UNM was in second. European Georgia came third in all of the polls as well. Polls indicate that Georgian voters tend to either stand loyal to their parties or tactically vote between different opposition parties. The major polls are conducted by Edison Research, IPSOS, and IRI. During the year, the popularity of parties has shifted depending on their respective stances towards the pandemic. Georgian Dream achieved an average of 30 per cent while the UNM hit a maximum of 22 per cent in February. According to the polls, the opposition holds a chance at securing enough

seats to form a coalition. The main obstacle for a unified opposition is the absence of a consensus candidate for prime minister. Georgian Dream may rely on small parties to form the government since none of the polls shows the party as receiving enough support to form a government on their own.

According to the latest poll conducted by IPSOS in October 2020, Georgian Dream is leading by 9.5 per cent ahead of its closest contender, the UNM. However, 33 per cent of voters remain undecided. The outcome of the election rests on what way these voters will turn.

Opinion Poll - October 2020



Expert Comment



George Mchedlishvili

Associate Professor, European University, Tbilisi

What is your general opinion on the Georgian elections and the situation in the country?

As expected, the pre-election situation has become extremely polarised, with mutual accusations and provocations going both ways. Unfortunately, there are almost no substantive debates between the parties and MP candidates on the substantive issues of their programmes. Perhaps the main driver of the vitriolic rhetoric is the United National Movement and its Strength in Unity coalition. The latter have been invariably finding themselves at the losing end since 2012, despite pretty lacklustre performance and low level of governance of the currently ruling Georgian Dream party (GD).

Given the very authoritarian and almost repressive methods of governance when they were in power, the UNM party has little chance of regaining the trust of the population under conditions of normal political struggle. Hence the permanent attempts to escalate it. And that is why Saakashvili's party is pedalling not the bad level of government and numerous mistakes of the Georgian Dream leadership, but the allegedly pro-Russian orientation of Ivanishvili and his party. In response, the GD has constantly been appealing to the unsavoury aspects of the UNM rule, which leads to the fact that for almost eight years most Georgians have been choosing a "lesser evil" among basically two leaders, Saakashvili and Ivanishvili, while there are relatively few diehard supporters of either party.

It is heartening to see that over the past few years new political forces (although the faces are mostly old) and coalitions that resolutely distance themselves from both UNM and GD have appeared in Georgia. Many believe that the more votes these parties garner, the more diverse and "polyphonic" the political life of Georgia will become, and the country will finally leave behind the de facto tradition of one-man rule.

In the early months of the pandemic, Georgia emerged as an unlikely success story, which was startling in comparison with struggling Europe and United States, and all the more surprising that it was coming from a leadership not known for its efficiency. It seemed that such an effective response to the pandemic would provide the ruling power with an easy electoral

victory. But the situation has deteriorated sharply since the beginning of September, and now that the daily number of infected has exceeded 1,000 people (in a country with a population of just under 4 million), the political capital earned in the spring is quickly evaporating, making the election results even more unpredictable.

What kind of change are Georgian citizens expecting from the elections?

Georgian citizens' primary concerns are poverty, under-employment (for almost 30 years, official figures conceal the dire situation in this regard) and overall sense of security these include physical, hard interstate security, an extremely topical issue given the occupation of Georgia's two territories by the Russian Federation. But hard security extends beyond Georgia's borders. Even the current crisis in Karabakh is a cause for concern in Georgia, a country where about 12% of the population is ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and also given the fact that overland arms supply routes to both Armenia and Azerbaijan pass through Georgia.

There are also issues of human rights and inclusive democracy and healthcare since drug and medication prices remain high and unaffordable for many. The majority of citizens want to live in a more European and modernised country, with less corruption and nepotism, extremely vexing issues over the entire 30-year period since independence. And of course, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tskhinvali Region), the territories occupied by Russia and violating Georgia's territorial integrity, are on almost everyone's mind.

There are many reasons for such challenging domestic and international environments. There is a firm belief in a considerable part of the society that the major problem has been bad governance, the absence of checks and balances. As a result, Georgia has always been ruled by one political force (party), practically without opposition and without a full-fledged political process. One gets the feeling that Georgian society has finally matured and emerged from the post-Soviet one-party system and the thirst for a leader/chief, who will settle all issues for the people.

What is the possibility of Saakashvili's return?

The return of the third president Mikhail Saakashvili will be a viable scenario only in case of a resounding opposition victory and the situation whereby senior executive positions, like the Ministry of Justice and Chief Prosecutor's Office, are taken by representatives of the opposition. What many Georgians, even some of his party supporters, are asking themselves today is will the former president's return be for the better, or will it lead to even greater polarisation in the country, whereby Georgia will remain stuck in a "battle of titans" rather than fully-fledged institutions-based democracy.

It also seems that Saakashvili, with his outsized ego, cannot even countenance the notion of him being redundant and basically the yesterday of Georgian politics. Besides, Georgia might be on the cusp of finally graduating from the post-Soviet limbo of larger-than-life leaders and going up to the next level of political development.

Is there a possibility of a shift in the foreign policy of Georgia after elections? Will the pro-Western direction prevail, or can we expect any moves from Moscow?

Moscow has been applying a full gamut of tactics to derail

Georgia's pro-western path since even before the Soviet collapse, right after realising that Tbilisi was not going to stay in Moscow's orbit. However, the public demand for domestic Westernisation and integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions is so substantive and consistent, and the harm inflicted by the Russian Federation to virtually every Georgian family (of course to a varying degree) is so massive that so far Moscow's diverse tactics have been largely unsuccessful. Granted, some political forces want to steer Georgia closer to Moscow, at the expense of pro-western vector, and some of them might enter the parliament given the low 1% threshold. However, these voices will remain in the minority, and the composition of the parliament will remain pro-western.

Whatever the outcome of the election, Moscow will likely continue its hybrid tactics of "creeping occupation", disinformation and other attempts to weaken Georgia's statehood and confidence in the western choice. Given the current "westlessness" in the South Caucasus region, which has been revealed par excellence in the present war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it might be argued that Moscow does have a window of opportunity to strengthen its political presence in the South Caucasus.



Ali Badirov

Georgian Labour Party –
Marneuli-Gardabani electoral district majoritarian MP candidate, Lawyer

"What are the expectations of the minorities in Georgia, especially the Azerbaijanis? What are your predictions for the elections?"

Georgian citizens, as well as the Azerbaijani minority, tend to believe that the problems will end after the election. I think they will overwhelmingly make an emotional choice. In contrast to Tbilisi, the Azerbaijani minority predominantly considers that Mikhail Saakashvili's return may solve their problems. However, I believe that Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) will not win the elections, and for them to form a government, they will need other opposition parties to agree to form a coalition. On the other hand, I expect a win for the opposition. They will come to power and form a coalition government. Conversely, the Georgian Dream Party will represent the opposition for the next year.

There are some differences in voting patterns between Georgian Azerbaijani voters and the rest of the country. The Tbilisi residents do not expect their problems to be solved

by Saakashvili. However, the UNM is still expected to be the second party after the Georgian Dream in these elections. It does not mean that the Georgian Dream will remain the party in power. I do not think that they will get 76 out of 150 MPs to have a majority. Nevertheless, I foresee that the opposition will obtain 76 seats.

The electoral law and criminal law saw substantial amendments in the past few months. Thus, I believe there will be less fraud in the elections this time. However, the rule of law will only prevail in the election stations. I am fairly certain that the Georgian Dream party will continue its old tactics to get votes. There have been many allegations in the past associating this party with vote-buying.

Overall, I expect some very interesting results, and I certainly expect power handover to the opposition. The Georgian Labour Party must be in the government to solve the major problems of Georgia, such as unemployment and the financial uncertainties faced by ordinary citizens.

