

An Overview of Georgia's 2020 Parliamentary Elections – Part 1

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Overwhelmed by completely extraordinary events, Georgia's primary political drama of 2020 is approaching its culmination. The [decree](#) issued by President Zurabishvili on August 31 set the date of the next parliamentary elections for October 31 and officially kicked off the pre-election campaign period. Electoral processes in Georgia are always dramatic, with election rhetoric mostly based on criticism of competitors without offering real solutions, and the narrative of a clash between good and evil having become a leitmotif of Georgian election campaigns. The upcoming parliamentary elections will be marked by several factors: for the first time since the restoration of independence, the citizens of Georgia will elect 120 members of parliament in a proportional manner; more than 40% of the vote will be required to form a majority; candidate lists require a gender quota; the election campaign and voting are taking place during a pandemic. Also noteworthy are the hybrid threats from the Russian Federation, the ongoing geopolitical processes in the region, and the US presidential election, all of which could have a significant impact on both the pre-election environment in Georgia and the post-election political climate.

Candidates

The active involvement of citizens in the electoral process is more common for a developing democracy than in established democracies, many of which are facing now the opposite challenge of low interest in politics and party activities, especially among young people. Such countries are introducing various incentives, for example, lowering the minimum age of candidacy. In Georgia, too, citizens over the age of 21 could win parliamentary seats in 2012-2018, although this change did not result in a dramatic breakthrough in youth involvement in the party system. Nevertheless, the Georgian political palette cannot complain about its diversity of colors, likely a defiant, oppositional reaction to the Soviet one-party past. Party membership was the only springboard to having a real impact on governance processes, as well as to career advancement. In independent Georgia, the one-party system has been replaced by a number of small parties, and the number of registered political unions has reached an impressive level. According to 2020 data, 263 political unions are officially registered, while 50 political parties are [registered](#) with the Central Election Commission for the 2020 parliamentary elections. If the Georgian political elite aims to overtake the number of existing political parties (349) in the cradle of the classical parliamentary system – the 67 million-strong [United Kingdom](#) – then it is moving forward at the right pace, however, if party formation is not a numbers game, but instead driven by the hope of influencing decision-making, alternative mechanisms may also be considered. Of course, there is nothing wrong with establishing new parties, however, when a political union has not enjoyed public support for years, perhaps advocating for ideas through public activism or the third sector would be more pragmatic. The low popularity of the non-governmental sector in society and questions about impartiality may be the main factors that push active citizens to look towards politics to promote their ideas. On the positive side, a ballot listing 66 political organizations gives Georgian citizens a wide range of choices and further highlights the importance of comprehensive voter information.

The Election Campaign

Most political entities have actively started their election campaign, with small-budget political parties expected to become more active in the final stretch of the campaign to make the most of limited resources. Despite the popularity of digital technologies and mass media in general in Georgia, certain political traditions still remain an important tool of engagement. For example, the so-called *war for the walls*, competing for the most strategic public spaces to hang election posters. The practice of public dinners with the electorate is still used, which, along with public health risks during the pandemic period, hints at voter bribery. [Voter bribery is one of the main challenges](#) firmly rooted in Georgia's political reality. For an economically disadvantaged population focused on the short-term solution to their own social problems, offering basic necessities is pragmatically effective, but it fundamentally destroys the democratic system, not to mention that it is against the law. Particular attention should also be paid to social reforms, the announcement or implementation of which coincides with the electoral process and legitimately raises questions about indirect bribery of voters and the misuse of administrative resources. With regard to

tightening legislation regarding the participation of public servants in the election campaign, it will be interesting to see how effectively the regulations are enforced. The use of administrative resources in the form of public officials has been a temptation for all Georgian authorities, and we hope this habit of the ruling party taking advantage of its unequal position of power will be actively condemned by the public.

Several parties have already announced parts of their political platform and interestingly, unlike previous elections, many are more focused on election promises and policy-specific content and less on individual political leaders. At this stage, the parties' election programs are mostly saturated with short slogans and there is next to no specificity, which significantly hinders voters from making informed choices. A high political standard requires a party or candidate to substantiate the financial and technical aspects of the implementation of each promise made. Another problem that often arises at party meetings is irrelevant and unachievable political promises made while reaching for a parliamentary mandate. Practice shows that candidates often promise to perform tasks that are in fact within the competence of the local self-government rather than a parliamentarian, or even within the exclusive competence of the executive branch. As public awareness of the key functions of parliamentary activity rise and local self-government is strengthened, gaining votes through irrelevant promises will become increasingly difficult.

Unfortunately, there was a case when a political actor, using historical sentiments, with reference to an artificially created threat, tried to awaken nationalist feelings among voters and risked provoking national hatred. Fortunately, due to the timely, appropriately negative response from the public, provocative billboards were removed. In this regard, the State Security Service faces a significant challenge, on the one hand it must effectively thwart any willful or unintentional attempt at national strife and, on the other hand, it must maintain political neutrality. The aforementioned incident is not only related to the internal context, but also includes the risk of external threats, which I will discuss in detail in the second article in this series.

The 2020 parliamentary elections are also special in that the new electoral system reduces the chances of one-party rule and pushes political entities to cooperate with each other. Lack of cooperation between the parties, an unwillingness to compromise, and frequent refusals to participate in collaborative decision-making all hinder the fundamental transformation and development of the Georgian political system. Georgian politics desperately needs to depersonalize campaign battles and instead focus on introducing educated, evidence-based policies as the basis of arguments. It will be interesting to watch whether political parties are able to maintain a constructive form of debate while opposing each other's policies in the remaining period before election day. A calm electoral environment and equal opportunities for all parties and candidates are a prerequisite for ensuring high-quality democratic elections.