

An Overview of Georgia's 2020 Parliamentary Elections (Part 2)

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The 2020 constitutional amendment that established the new, mixed electoral system has had a positive impact on the agenda of political parties, the electoral environment and general political dynamics in Georgia. The matrix of pre-election activities has somewhat shifted in the direction of thematic programs, and campaigns have also adopted a more content-focused approach. Compared to previous elections, more political statements focus on sectoral policies, which is, in large part, an impact of the new proportional system. According to the Constitution, the upcoming parliamentary elections will be the last held within the current mixed proportional-majoritarian format. Despite the reduction of the number of majoritarian districts to 30, the majoritarian system still has a significant impact on the political process. The proportional system allows the interests of diverse voters to be better reflected in the legislature, leading to the formation of a government under a coalition agreement – a system in place in many parliamentary style Western democracies.

The next parliamentary elections are the last chance for parties to agree on joint opposition candidates in majoritarian districts, as majoritarian districts will no longer exist during the next election, and opposition parties have taken advantage of this opportunity to cooperate. In general, the attempt to reach an agreement on a common candidate is not new in the history of Georgian elections, nor is the unification of opposing forces with the grand aim of removing the ruling powers from the reins of government a novelty of the 2020 parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, the modus operandi of the Georgian political spectrum, in which players see themselves as fighting a mythical battle of good vs. evil, remains unchanged. As a result, opposition parties end up uniting not on principles, but against a specific actors, which throws the country into an endless cycle of negative political rhetoric. Violations of the opposition agreement have also been reported, which aggravated the situation. However, it is worth mentioning that parties have reached consensus on the economy, education, and justice, planning for sweeping reforms by the next Parliament if elected. It will be interesting to watch to what degree the political actors will fulfill their obligations after the elections, if they are given the opportunity to do so in the new parliament. In any case, political compromise, the lack of which is so acutely felt in the relationship between the parties, is critical to establish a healthy democratic environment.

With two weeks to go before the election and the campaigns entering their final phases, political parties are mobilizing their last efforts to win voters. The election campaign has been largely peaceful, with the exception of a few incidents to which the Interior Ministry was able to respond in a timely manner. Despite the active use of social networks and alternative digital platforms for election agitation, television broadcasters still play an important role in disseminating information. The degree of polarization in the journalistic space, unfortunately, is still high and less analytical content is produced. Media organizations are mainly engaged in discrediting political parties or politicians. Fake news and general misinformation prevents voters from making an informed decision. Given these factors, it is critically important for politicians to actively engage in political debate, and take the opportunity to, live, demonstrate the superiority of their own platform through reason-based arguments. In addition, political debates provide an opportunity to effectively combat disinformation and contribute to the creation of a civil electoral environment. The fact that politicians harbor personal animosities towards each other is not only a feature of the Georgian reality. Nevertheless, those who are on the election front should remember that their public status primarily demands accountability to voters. By participating in debates, the electorate is introduced to political views and issues-based party preferences are formed, which is critical to making informed choices.

Election Ethics

The change in the electoral system has not yet fully affected the behavior of political entities, and aggressive election rhetoric, personal insults and even physical attacks are still problems in Georgian politics. An important document in this regard is the [Code of Conduct of Political Parties for the 2020 Parliamentary Elections](#), adopted under the auspices of the Central Election Commission, which sets ethical standards for parties and individual politicians. 40 political organizations signed the document, giving it a high degree of legitimacy. The Code of Conduct is declarative in nature and its implementation depends on the good faith of the parties.

Unfortunately, a number of provisions of the Code are still violated in practice, although the general political environment has improved. With the approach of election day, the temptation to use administrative resources will increase. However, given the tightened legislation, as well as the special attention paid by international organizations and the diplomatic corps, there is a positive expectation that violations will not be widespread.

The Majoritarian as a Business Manager?

Observation of the recent pre-election campaign for the mixed parliamentary elections confirms the belief that the era of parliamentary-majoritarian elections in Georgia is ending in such a way that a large number of politicians do not understand the essence of the system. Obtaining a parliamentary seat by direct election does not mean making promises on all issues, regardless of whether it is within your competence or not. Majoritarian candidates' election promises to improve the roads, build or renovate sewage systems, schedule public transport, or address other issues within the exclusive purview of municipal governments reveal several unfortunate truths: fundamental problems in the field of local self-governments need to be addressed; the level of voter awareness on electoral issues needs to be raised and the political class needs to be refined, both in terms of education and responsibility. Politicians' lack of understanding of legislative responsibilities, as well as the role and function of Parliament, affects not only the quality of election campaigns, but also the quality of the elected parliament. There is an expectation that the transition to a fully proportional system will be a significant impetus for the establishment of proper relationships between candidates and voters. However, without strengthening local self-government, we will inevitably adopt new forms of perverted electoral processes.

Pre-Election Polls

Sociological research has become an important tool of the political struggle. It may sound paradoxical, but instead of understanding the attitudes of citizens, surveys are used to manipulate public opinion in Georgia. It is noteworthy that all influential media organizations independently commission surveys, conducted by Georgian or non-Georgian companies, and periodically publish interim data before the elections. In itself, the diversity of surveys helps the conscientious voter to conduct their own multifaceted analysis, however, it is a problem that research organizations publish dramatically asymmetric results. Also, the fact that the results of the research lean towards the political group under the influence of which the contracting media organization acts helps us to draw certain conclusions. Such wide differences between the results can be explained by several factors: research organizations use different methodologies; consciously or unconsciously a sample is selected that will give the desired responses; researchers simply publish fabricated results that are acceptable to their client. It is difficult to assess the general impact of the results of sociological research on electorate, however, such research can serve as a compass for the undecided voter. If there is a significant discrepancy between polls and the eventual election results, it could serve as a base of justification for the losing parties to question the legitimacy of the election itself.

Challenges from Abroad

The 2020 parliamentary elections are taking place amid a particularly difficult international environment. The first problem that threatens regional peace is the ongoing armed military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The geopolitical anatomy of the confrontation and the geographical location of Georgia is an important challenge for the country and we must be especially careful to maintain a neutral position. A significant factor is the attitude of Georgian-Armenians and Georgian-Azerbaijanis to the conflict and the political and personal sentiments that exist towards the parties to the conflict. While immanent threats are not apparent at this stage, it is imperative that the state's work on the issue of inclusive integration of national minorities become even more proactive. Gaining electoral support in regions densely populated by national minorities is a matter of particular concern to parties in all elections. It is vital that no political entity attempts to manipulate the topic of the conflict in an attempt to receive electoral dividends, as any such attempt could end in dire consequences for our country.

Against the background of the situation in the region, threats from Russia are increasing. In connection with the Karabakh conflict, Russia will inevitably use the torrent of misinformation against Georgia to interfere in the election process. The fact that the Russian Federation will do its best to interfere in the elections is a foreseeable challenge, however, in the face of hybrid threats, it is difficult to predict specific mechanisms. Ongoing events in Belarus and the South Caucasus are a favorable factor for Russia to expand its sphere of influence. Russia, a master of manipulating regional threats, will inevitably try to diversify its attacks on Georgia. Against this background, it is critically important that the parties operating in Georgia do not try to monetize their own political aspirations with the conscious or unconscious support of Russia's efforts.

An active, informed civil electorate remains the best defense Georgia has against these risks, threats, and challenges to its young democracy.