



Georgia Election Watch



For Immediate Release

NDI Report: Political Will Needed to Translate Georgia's Electoral Reforms into Strong Democratic Elections

August 19, 2020

Tbilisi, Georgia -- As Georgia approaches parliamentary elections in October 2020, it must account for a global pandemic and significant recent changes to the electoral framework, which are expected to influence campaigns, election procedures, voter behavior, and the composition of the next legislature.

“The foundations for democratic elections are in place,” said NDI President Derek Mitchell. “Yet without some demonstrable improvements, a pattern of declining public confidence will continue. What is needed is the political will to place the integrity of the process over partisan interests.”

NDI today released *Georgia Election Watch*, an analysis of the pre-election environment based on in-depth interviews conducted virtually from July 28 - August 4, 2020, by an NDI delegation led by President Mitchell. Other delegation members included Georgia Country Director Alan Gillam, Interim Georgia Country Director Teona Kupunia, Director for Election Programs Patrick Merloe, and Regional Director for Eurasia Programs Laura Jewett.

The NDI report addresses issues related to the electoral framework and administration; the campaign environment; the role of media and disinformation; gender and inclusion; and the impact of covid-19. The NDI delegation spoke with representatives of the Georgian government, political parties, Central Election Commission, civil society organizations (CSOs), the media, domestic observer organizations, and international diplomatic community. The NDI report also benefited from ongoing interaction between the Institute's Tbilisi office and a full range of electoral stakeholders based on relationships developed over 25 years of NDI programming in Georgia.

The report found that almost 30 years into independence, Georgia has proved its technical capacity to conduct credible elections. The country has taken important steps forward to ensure greater women's political participation and has laid out a concrete path toward fulfilling promises of a fully proportional electoral system. Citizen expectations for a democratic process are thus high.

Yet persistent issues related to electoral integrity have remained unaddressed, fueling polarization and detracting from public confidence in election outcomes. Concerns remain about lax or biased enforcement, abuses of state resources and prosecutorial authorities, intimidation and harassment, personalized and polarizing campaigning, continuing exclusion of underrepresented groups, and threats to the integrity of the information environment. These factors in turn make the country more vulnerable to external interference.

“In coming together to pass wide-ranging electoral reforms and safeguard public health this year, Georgians have demonstrated their ability to overcome their differences in the public interest,” said Mitchell. “Heading into elections, the country’s leaders and political actors will need to summon similar resolve to take the steps necessary to ensure a fair, transparent and inclusive process that does justice to the will of the Georgia people.”

The NDI report makes 30 recommendations to improve Georgia’s electoral process. They include the following:

- Authorities from the Central Election Commission, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Inter-Agency Commission for Free and Fair Elections (IACFF), State Audit Office (SAO), and other government entities with electoral responsibilities should rigorously enforce all legislation and regulations respecting the elections in a timely and impartial manner.
- Credible citizen election monitors should be allowed to do their work, in compliance with the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations, without interference or intimidation.
- Political parties and candidates should develop policy platforms focused on solutions to issues that concern citizens. Campaigns should refrain from speech that inhibits pre- or post-election cross-party cooperation or seeks to denigrate public confidence in the process.
- Parties should develop inclusive issue-based campaign programs that address concerns of underrepresented groups, including women, LGBTQI communities, people with disabilities, and ethnic and religious minorities, and integrate them into their internal operations, including as candidates. In their campaign communications, parties and candidates should consider issuing statements in support of equality and anti-discrimination.
- Media outlets and journalists should be allowed to perform their legitimate functions and exercise their rights, in keeping with journalistic ethics, without government interference, harassment, or arbitrary, undue or overly burdensome restrictions. Authorities should scrupulously avoid threats or steps that could be seen as politically motivated interference in media independence, including prosecutions of media owners or imposition of “special managers” at telecommunications companies.
- Facebook, YouTube and other online platforms should cooperate closely with Georgian CSOs to mitigate information manipulation. Facebook should urgently address issues raised by Georgian CSOs related to identification, removal, and notification of social media consumers about coordinated inauthentic behavior; prohibiting micro-targeting; and improving fact-checking labels.

NDI has assigned experts to conduct long-term, in-depth analysis of the themes highlighted in the report and will continue to monitor the overall election process through its conclusion. NDI may issue further analysis and recommendations through the election period and will issue a comprehensive assessment of the overall electoral process shortly after the elections.

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NDI wishes to express its appreciation to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which has supported this issue of Georgia Election Watch, as well as the Institute’s other ongoing election analysis efforts.

NDI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. NDI has organized more than 250 international observation missions or assessments to more than 65 countries, including numerous assessments in Georgia since 1992. For more information about NDI and its programs, please visit www.ndi.org.