



# Georgia Election Watch



*The National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute) offers this analysis of the environment and procedures surrounding Georgia's October 31, 2020 parliamentary elections with the aim of supporting a peaceful, credible process. NDI's analysis is being conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and in light of constraints imposed by the global covid-19 pandemic, which precluded deployment of additional international personnel to Georgia. NDI therefore adapted its methodology to accommodate intensive remote engagement in addition to its activities on the ground. This analysis is based on in-depth virtual interviews conducted October 22 - 31 with representatives of the Georgian government, political parties, the electoral administration, civil society, the media, domestic and international observer organizations, and the diplomatic community; input from a team of long-term analysts who have virtually monitored the electoral framework and administration, the campaign environment, the role of media and disinformation, gender and inclusion, and the impact of covid-19 since September 15; and the Institute's expertise and relationships developed over 25 years of programming in Georgia. NDI's assessment of election-day procedures, in particular, reflects the findings of credible nonpartisan citizen monitors who were deployed throughout the country on October 31. This analysis builds on NDI Georgia Election Watch reports issued on [August 19](#), [October 9](#), and [October 20](#), 2020.<sup>1</sup>*

## GEORGIA ELECTION WATCH

### Report on October 31, 2020 Parliamentary Elections

NOVEMBER 2, 2020

#### Summary

Irregularities in results protocols, widespread reports of potentially intimidating behavior in or around polling stations, delays in the publication of results, and persistent perceptions of pre-election abuses of power detracted from notable improvements in the legal framework and administrative procedures for Georgia's October 31, 2020 parliamentary elections. As the results of the first round are finalized and the country heads to run-off elections on November 21, government leaders and election authorities will need to take extraordinary steps to ensure public confidence in the overall process and final results.

Election day voting proceeded mostly in compliance with the rules prescribed by law. According to the Central Election Commission's (CEC) preliminary results, turnout was 56.11 percent and nine parties crossed the threshold for proportional representation, while 16 of 30 majoritarian seats will go to runoffs.

<sup>1</sup> National Democratic Institute, "Georgia Election Watch Report," August 19, 2020; "Georgia Election Watch Bulletin #1," October 9, 2020; and "Georgia Election Watch Bulletin #2," October 20, 2020, <https://www.ndi.org/2020-georgia-parliamentary-election>.

However, credible international as well as domestic observer groups highlighted irregularities related to results protocols and vote secrecy, among other issues. They reported instances of physical confrontations outside of polling stations, obstruction of the work of journalists and observers, allegations of vote buying and vote rigging, and the intimidating presence of party coordinators and activists outside most polling stations. Following election day, opposition activists held large protest rallies, many calling for recounts, or even invalidation of results and repeat elections.

Overall, the legal framework provided a sound basis for the conduct of the elections. The majority of NDI's interlocutors positively assessed a package of constitutional reforms and legislative amendments passed in June and July, while noting issues that remained unaddressed. The administration of pre-election procedures was generally assessed as competent, legally compliant and transparent, but opposition parties and civil society organizations (CSOs) consistently raised complaints about excessive partisanship, particularly on lower-level commissions. Most stakeholders positively assessed measures to safeguard public health under conditions of the covid-19 pandemic, with some notable exceptions. Low public confidence in Georgia's judicial system fed into civil society and opposition party mistrust in the electoral complaints and appeals processes. The ruling Georgian Dream party (GD) had access to the vast preponderance of financial resources, reinforcing longstanding concerns about the integrity of campaign and party financing frameworks.

The campaign was open and pluralistic, although tensions and incendiary attacks increased as election day approached. Parties, CSOs, and media outlets reported multiple incidents of violence and intimidation during the campaign period. Allegations of abuses of state resources were widespread. There were also significant numbers of reports of voter bribery. The changes to the electoral framework encouraged new parties to run, several of which won seats. However, parties had uneven access to coverage on television, due to media polarization. Campaign messaging focused more on criticizing opponents than putting forth constructive and distinctive policy solutions. The pandemic impacted campaign strategies less than anticipated.

Georgia has taken significant steps toward promoting greater inclusion and diversity in politics, most notably a new gender quota. The new parliament will likely include at least 28 women, a slight increase from the current number. Despite this progress, women, ethnic and religious minorities, persons with disabilities and members of the LGBTI+ community remain underrepresented in the new parliament, as well as in party organizations and their platforms.

The media landscape is diverse and outspoken but divided along partisan lines, resulting in biased coverage, and impeding voters' ability to make informed choices. There were multiple reports of violence or threats of violence targeting journalists. Due to limited candidate participation, televised debates did not live up to their potential to inform voters and distinguish contestants from one another. Information manipulation was widespread, particularly on online platforms such as Facebook. Domestically-generated falsifications appeared to be a larger problem than disinformation from abroad.

This report is preliminary in nature. The official results are yet to be finalized, electoral complaints are yet to be lodged and adjudicated, and the results of runoffs will not be known for at least three weeks. The people of Georgia will ultimately determine the credibility and legitimacy of their elections. NDI will continue to monitor electoral developments and will issue further analysis, if needed.

## Political Context

Georgia's October 31 parliamentary elections took place in the face of a global pandemic, significant and recent changes to the country's electoral framework, ongoing political polarization, and tepid confidence in the incumbent legislature. Continuing aggression from the Kremlin and escalating regional tensions also impacted electoral dynamics and shaped the political environment.

As election day neared, a spike in covid-19 cases affected campaign strategies and polling station protocols. Some covid-affected voters faced notable barriers to voting. The pandemic strained the Georgian economy and healthcare system, particularly as infection rates increased. While Georgia was held up as an international model for managing the virus during the spring and summer of 2020, the government's handling of the crisis became a prominent theme in the campaign in the fall.

A pattern of one-party dominance has been characteristic of Georgian governance for decades. In addition, the electoral landscape in recent years has been largely consumed by antagonism between the ruling GD and opposition United National Movement (UNM) parties, creating a polarized dynamic that has prevented other parties and movements from gaining traction. Constitutional amendments and legislative reforms passed in July 2020 will result in a more diverse legislature, with preliminary results indicating that nine parties will cross the threshold for proportional representation.

According to [NDI](#) and other surveys over the past year, the majority of Georgians rate the parliament's performance as poor. In NDI's poll, 64 percent of Georgians did not think the parliament took into account their opinions, and 68 percent believed that members of parliament served only their own interests.<sup>2</sup> These findings suggest that the incoming parliament cannot take the public's confidence for granted. At the same time, the data point to a significant opportunity. Those parliamentary factions and members that can meaningfully demonstrate their integrity and responsiveness to citizens' concerns will be well-positioned to earn public support.

Kremlin aggression remains a central feature of Georgian politics. Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and other forms of hybrid warfare aimed at thwarting Georgia's democratic and European aspirations, are ongoing. Responding to this pressure strains and complicates Georgia's political, social, and economic systems and requires political contestants to declare and repeatedly defend geostrategic allegiances, distracting them from other pressing issues. Moreover, the surrounding region is experiencing upheaval, including an escalating military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and ongoing protests in Belarus in the wake of a fraudulent election there in August.

Georgians have consistently demonstrated their commitment to a democratic and European future. Living up to these aspirations is a core responsibility of the incumbent and incoming parliaments and governments. Rebuilding public trust in the wake of these elections will be a critical first step. Georgians need to rise above the demonization and polarization characteristic of these and previous elections to demonstrate that they have rejected longstanding patterns of abusing power for partisan gain. Once seated, the new majority party or coalition will need to ensure it is inclusive and consultative, and work to mitigate corrosive political polarization, through cross-party engagement and systematic outreach to non-parliamentary parties, CSOs, and citizens. It will also need to deliver tangible solutions to Georgians' persistent economic concerns.

The next test will be conducting a credible and transparent complaints adjudication process to address the serious concerns that have been raised, followed by the run-off elections, which must be conducted in a peaceful, transparent and fair environment, free from violence and intimidation. The government and election administrators will need to take urgent, visible, and sustained steps to demonstrate their commitment to such a process.

## Election Day Procedures

*The Institute's analysis of election day processes was conducted virtually, due to the covid-19 pandemic. It is based on the findings of credible domestic and international groups that conducted in-person observation, particularly those of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), which used the parallel vote tabulation methodology to assess quantitative and qualitative aspects of the*

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<sup>2</sup> NDI, "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of December 2019 Survey," January 16, 2020, <https://www.ndi.org/publications/results-december-2019-public-opinion-polls-georgia-o>.

*elections.<sup>3</sup> The Institute was also in close virtual communication with political parties, candidates, election administrators and the media throughout election day.*

The CEC reported turnout of 56.11 percent of registered voters. This is comparable to previous parliamentary elections (60.7 percent in 2012 and 51.63 in 2016), indicating that covid-19 may have had a limited effect on turnout. While there were delays in posting results on the official CEC website on the night of the elections, according to the CEC's preliminary results for proportional lists, nine parties crossed the 1 percent threshold to enter parliament: GD secured 48.17 percent, UNM received 27.13, European Georgia (EG) 3.78, Lelo 3.15, Strategy Builder 3.15, Alliance of Patriots 3.14, Girchi 2.89, Citizens - Aleko Elisashvili 1.33, and Labour Party 1 percent. For majoritarian mandates, the CEC reports that GD secured 14 out of 30 seats in the first round. In the 16 majoritarian districts where no candidate secured more than 50 percent of the vote, run-off elections between the two candidates who receive the most votes will be held on November 21.

According to domestic observation groups, in the majority of polling stations across Georgia, election day voting proceeded mostly in compliance with the law. However, credible observer groups highlighted irregularities related to vote secrecy and the results protocols as well as a number of procedural issues, including inking procedures, voter identification, application of covid-19-related measures, and allocation of roles among precinct election commission (PEC) members. Election day was marred by obstruction of the work of journalists and observers, as well as allegations of vote buying and vote rigging.

Observers also reported the intimidating presence of party coordinators and activists outside most polling stations. They were described as tracking voters and at times actively campaigning. This led to a tense atmosphere and several instances of physical confrontations. Police launched investigations into 12 criminal cases, and administrative proceedings were initiated on 16 offenses.

Several concerns were raised about the process of filling out and tabulating results protocols. According to domestic observers, in a significant number of PECs, the number of ballots in the ballot box differed from the number of signatures on the voter list. In addition, in some cases summary protocols were incomplete or incorrect. Complicating the monitoring process, some observers were not able to receive copies of the protocols, due to the lack of a copier or printer in those PECs. Some precincts also failed to deliver timely results, contributing to speculation about the integrity of the results.

Cumulatively, these issues led to mistrust in the process and questioning of the announced results. A significant number of election day complaints have been submitted and others continue to come in. According to the CEC complaints database, as of November 1, 546 complaints about election day have been submitted to the DEC. The most frequent reasons include violations of the voting procedure (42 cases); violation of the mobile voting procedure (39 cases); violation of procedures regarding the distribution of tasks among PEC members (37 cases); improper performance of duties of the commission members (34 cases); violation of observers' rights (31 cases); violation of the secrecy of the ballot (29 cases); violation of the inking procedures (23 cases); violation of the procedures regarding voter lists (13 cases). In 341 cases, disciplinary action against a commission member is requested. There are 66 complaints requesting precinct results be annulled and 27 complaints requesting reports on administrative violations.

Multiple credible observer groups have called for recounts or the annulment of results in precincts identified as problematic. Thousands of opposition party activists have gathered in the streets of Tbilisi to protest, questioning the integrity of the overall process and legitimacy of the results. In validating elections, it is important that the public have trust in the process. Extra effort should be made by electoral

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<sup>3</sup> ISFED, "Results of Parallel Vote Tabulation," November 1, 2020, <https://isfed.ge/eng/presrelizebi/201101022808khmebis-paraleluri-datvliis-PVT-shedegebi>; OSCE/ODIHR, "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions - Preliminary Conclusions," November 1, 2020, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/d/469005.pdf>; GYLA, "Evaluation of the Parliamentary Elections of 31 October 2020," November 1, 2020, <https://gyla.ge/en/post/2020-tslis-31-oqtombris-saparlamento-archevnebis-shefaseba#sthash.nEgvyQmK.nnbV1I5d.dpbs>; and TI-Georgia, "Summary of Monitoring of 31 October 2020 Parliamentary Elections," November 1, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/summary-monitoring-31-october-2020-parliamentary-elections>.

authorities to swiftly, transparently, and properly adjudicate submitted complaints, and conduct recounts or reruns, where appropriate.

## Recommendations before the run-off

Electoral authorities should make extra efforts to swiftly and properly adjudicate submitted complaints and conduct recounts or reruns, where appropriate.

Parties and candidates should make every effort to provide adequate evidence to substantiate claims of electoral violations, abuse of state resources, or pressure and intimidation, and follow available procedures for seeking redress.

Observation of the ongoing complaint process as well as run-offs remains critical. All stakeholders should respect and uphold the rights of nonpartisan independent observers to continue their oversight work without interference or intimidation.

The CEC should conduct additional training for PEC officials on the rights of observers and re-emphasize the need to rigorously and consistently apply all prescribed procedures, including those related to allocation of PEC responsibilities among members, vote secrecy, inking procedures, and results protocols.

Authorities should conduct swift and thorough investigations into alleged cases of vote buying and voter intimidation, and take all measures necessary to prevent such practices in the future.

All stakeholders should make efforts to de-escalate tensions, follow established protocols for pursuing alleged election-related irregularities, and facilitate a peaceful environment.

The election administration, in cooperation with CSOs and the media, should undertake a broad voter education campaign focusing on their right to vote secrecy as a fundamental election principle.

## Electoral Framework and Administration

### *Electoral System and Legal Framework*

Overall, the legal framework provided a sound basis for the conduct of the elections. The majority of NDI's interlocutors positively assessed a package of constitutional reforms and legislative amendments passed in June and July, on the grounds that it would facilitate a more pluralistic and representative legislature. Chief among the changes was the phased transition to a fully proportional system by 2024, moving in 2020 to 120 proportional and 30 majoritarian seats from the previous 77 proportional and 73 majoritarian ratio; a reduction in 2020 in the threshold for winning parliamentary seats from 5 to 1 percent; a requirement of



gaining at least 40.6 percent of the vote for a party to form a government on its own; and the introduction of a phased gender quota requiring in 2020 that one in four candidates on party lists be a woman.

However, many representatives from opposition parties, CSOs and the media claimed that some changes were insufficient, while other long-standing issues remain unaddressed. These relate to the composition of the election administration, the regulation of campaigning on social networks and other online platforms, and the resolution of complaints, particularly related to the count and the results, among other topics. These interlocutors also pointed to an enduring deficit of political will to comply with the spirit as well as the letter of the law.

### ***Election Administration***

The administration of pre-election procedures was generally assessed as competent, legally compliant and transparent. As described below, however, opposition parties and CSOs consistently raised complaints about excessive partisanship, particularly on lower-level commissions. In addition, some regulations related to covid-19 mitigation measures generated controversy.

The CEC administered the elections in line with the legal framework and in a generally transparent manner, despite significant challenges posed by the pandemic. It conducted regular stakeholder consultations, meetings and sessions and published decisions, updates and information about complaints on its website in a timely manner. The Commission implemented diverse voter education campaigns through the media and direct contact with voters, some in collaboration with civil society groups. It conducted online and offline training programs for election officials, civil servants, observers, party and candidate representatives, journalists, police and others. Some trainings focused on emerging challenges, such as the implementation of covid-related measures, electoral cybersecurity and prevention of cyberbullying for female candidates. Voter lists were considered largely reliable and the candidate registration process proceeded without major problems.

The CEC also initiated a series of memoranda of understanding (MoUs) and codes of conduct with various stakeholder groups. The MoUs involved the Ministry of Internal Affairs on the role of the police in electoral processes; the Inter-Agency Commission on Free and Fair Elections (IACFFE) and 13 CSOs on preventing misuse of administrative resources; and the Council of Europe, IACFFE and Civil Service Bureau on training civil servants about the rules pertaining to the use of administrative resources. The Commission also produced codes of conduct on ethics (signed by 33 CSOs), election administration (signed by election officials), and campaign behavior (signed by 40 political parties).

In addition to the CEC, 73 district election commissions (DECs) and 3,847 PECs administered the elections. Each commission is composed of 12 members - six so-called professional members, who are meant to be independent of political affiliation, and six party-appointed members, who are allocated based on their representation in the parliament (three from GD and one each from UNM, EG, and Alliance of Patriots). PECs are established prior to each election, with DECs appointing the six professional members through an open call for applications.

Despite new safeguards aimed at ensuring the neutrality of professional commissioners, opposition parties, and CSOs raised questions about the selection process, claiming that in some districts it seemed to be based on lists of predetermined winners rather than open competition among applicants. Reviews of some professional PEC members' backgrounds revealed that they had party roles in their recent past. While most PEC chairpersons were selected from among the professional members, those who were selected from among party-appointed members all represented the ruling party. In three districts, protests over the selection process led to confrontation and violence.

The CEC stressed that no violation of the law occurred in the PEC selection process, noting that some 900 individuals were disqualified because they had served as party-appointed members in the previous election, suggesting that the partisan filtering system had impact. In many districts, according to the CEC, the number of applicants was the same as or close to the number of vacancies, precluding true competition.

According to the CEC, 14,170 voters were registered to vote abroad; 7,150 in hospitals or state quarantine; and 3,695 more in self-isolation due to the pandemic. The CEC faced challenges in recruiting a sufficient number of PEC members to serve these voters. To resolve the problem, the CEC created “special groups” to fulfill the function of PECs when the usual seven-person quorum could not be met. Some opposition parties and CSOs criticized this approach, claiming it interfered with oversight of the process.

## ***Covid-19***

The challenge of balancing public health concerns during a global pandemic with citizens’ right to vote were immense. In many cases, Georgian decision makers were forced to choose among only undesirable options. Measures adopted to safeguard public health during the election were developed through generally inclusive processes and most stakeholders assessed them positively. These included requirements that voters wear masks, that poll workers, observers, party proxies and media representatives wear personal protective equipment and have temperature checks upon entering polling stations, and that precincts be regularly disinfected.

A particularly challenging and controversial issue was the management of polling procedures for covid-affected voters. An October 19 CEC decree stipulated that individuals in self-isolation or receiving treatment at home could vote only through a mobile ballot box, for which prospective voters needed to register within a brief window (October 24 - 27). The CEC reported that 9,940 citizens applied for the mobile ballot box, claiming to be in self-isolation. Upon cross-checking the applications with the official self-isolation database, the Commission registered 3,695 of the applicants. Another 1,917 individuals - including members of the “special groups” that administered the mobile balloting, election observers, and media representatives - were registered. Some political parties and CSOs objected to the tight time frame and criticized the registration process, which was fraught with confusion and miscommunication. Some parties and CSOs also questioned the CEC’s decision to use mobile ballot boxes for covid-19 patients, instead of setting up special precincts in hospitals and quarantine zones meeting a defined threshold of voters. They expressed strong concern that the process would be difficult to monitor effectively and therefore be open to manipulation.

## ***Complaints and Appeals***

In the pre-election period, 343 complaints about violations of electoral laws had been submitted to the election administration or the courts. The majority of complaints were related to the election of PEC members (116 cases), participation of an unauthorized person in the election campaign (47 cases), violations related to the mobile ballot box (40 cases), and the absence of PEC members from the polling station during working hours (32 cases). Of these, eight were satisfied, one was partially satisfied, 153 were not satisfied, 94 were left without consideration, seven were sent to the relevant body for response, and 80 were still under consideration. Electoral contestants, CSOs, and media representatives frequently dismissed the usefulness of submitting official complaints, questioning the impartiality of the election administration, courts and police. They also acknowledged the difficulties of sufficiently substantiating their claims, and noted that many of the perceived offenses did not necessarily violate the letter of the law, but rather its spirit. The election administration reported that many of the complaints it received lacked legal basis or were submitted in violation of the legal requirements, alleging that they were at times filed in order to increase the number of rejections and with the intent of discrediting the election administration.

The IACFFE, mandated to prevent and respond to election-related violations by public officials, examined some 500 possible violations by October 22 and identified 48 cases that fell under its mandate. Among them, 17 instances were related to alleged misuse of administrative resources, 10 to alleged violence, five to alleged vote buying, and 16 instances to other forms of alleged violations. In two instances, the IACFFE concluded that the violations occurred, while five are still under examination. The IACFFE also issued a number of recommendations, including to civil servants to refrain from campaigning while conducting official duties, and to supporters of political parties to abstain from disrupting opponents’ campaigns and engaging in violence. CSOs and political parties were invited to participate in the sessions, but most opposition parties and some CSOs boycotted, alleging that the Commission’s composition did not allow for impartial examinations. Representatives of the IACFFE in their turn claimed that the boycott seriously hindered the

body's investigative capacities. The low levels of participation and trust in the IACFFE have impeded its effectiveness and relevance.

Civil society and opposition party misgivings about the procedures for electoral complaints and appeals have roots in overall low public confidence in Georgia's judicial system. [NDI's December 2019 survey](#) showed that 45 percent of Georgians assessed the performance of courts poorly, while only 10 percent rated them positively.<sup>4</sup> Before the 2016 parliamentary elections and again in 2017, opposition parties and CSOs repeatedly raised concerns about delayed investigations, selective pursuit of cases, pressure on judges, and uneven and disproportionate application of sanctions. Criminal charges brought in October 2020 against two civil servants involved in delimiting a boundary with Azerbaijan under the UNM government in 2006-2007 were raised as a new example of a potentially politically-motivated prosecution. The need to establish judicial independence has been a persistent refrain in Georgian politics.

### ***Campaign Finance***

Campaign financing has been a topic of longstanding concern in Georgian electoral politics. The issues relate to wide disparities among parties and candidates in campaign funding; blurred lines between campaign, state and private resources; claims of pressure and intimidation on donors; and allegations of off-the-books "dark money" schemes, among other factors. There is broad agreement that the result is a playing field that gives disproportionate advantages to the ruling party, including more significant resources to mobilize for political advertising and other campaign activities. Existing laws and regulations have done little to curb the disparities, and relevant institutions lack the resources and -- according to opposition parties and CSOs -- the political independence to effectively monitor and enforce those laws.

Most of NDI's interlocutors positively assessed recent legal amendments aimed at enhancing financial transparency, but some raised concerns about the limited investigative powers and human resources of the State Audit Office (SAO), which is mandated to oversee party and campaign financing, and the broader challenges of shaping a comprehensive oversight framework to enhance campaign integrity. During the campaign, the SAO published all financial declarations within the legally prescribed deadline and initiated the verification of their compliance with the law. One week prior to election day, the SAO published an interim report regarding the period of September 1 to October 12. According to this, the SAO initiated administrative proceedings in seven cases; three cases had been completed with administrative protocols drawn up and relevant decisions made by the court; two cases were sent to the courts, and two cases were still being investigated. However, it acknowledged that it lacked the ability to investigate allegations of foreign funding for political parties or sufficiently oversee online campaigning.

In these elections, the ruling GD party had access to the vast preponderance of resources. While total amounts for the 2020 elections have not yet been finalized, SAO reporting through October 23 showed GD receiving close to half of the donations reported, or just over 10 million GEL. The next closest party, Lelo, had received 2.6 million GEL in donations. Expenditures reflected a similar pattern.<sup>5</sup> A longstanding complaint by opposition parties in Georgia is that individuals and businesses feel pressured to donate only to the ruling party. Transparency International-Georgia (TI-Georgia) reported on an apparently close correlation between donations to the ruling party and receipt of public tenders, raising questions about a possible "pay-to-play" system.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Election Observation***

The CEC reported that 132 domestic observer groups, representing more than 47,000 individuals, were accredited as observers to the elections. ISFED monitored the pre-election process and, on election day, conducted a parallel vote tabulation (PVT), a statistically-based method for evaluating the quality of election

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> State Audit Office, "Interim Financial Monitoring Report for October 31, 2020 Elections," October 23, 2020, [https://monitoring.sao.ge/files/8/2020%20elections\\_ENG.pdf](https://monitoring.sao.ge/files/8/2020%20elections_ENG.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> TI-Georgia, "Funding of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections of Georgia - Interim Report," October 30, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/sakartvelos-parlamentis-2020-clis-archevnebis-kampaniis-dapinanseba-shualeduri-angarishi>.



day processes and verifying official results. In addition to deploying hundreds of observers to polling stations, the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), TI-Georgia, and Public Movement Multinational Georgia (PMMG) each conducted long-term observation and issued pre-election assessment reports. PMMG focused particularly on ethnic minority settlements. The efforts of these and other experienced nonpartisan groups contributed substantially to the overall transparency, accountability and integrity of the elections.

However, some stakeholders raised concerns that some of the other accredited groups misrepresented themselves as nonpartisan when they were in fact aligned with political interests. Those raising the concerns claimed these groups intended to disrupt the work of the commissions, discredit the findings of genuinely nonpartisan observer organizations, or delegitimize the elections.

Some international groups, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and embassies also deployed observers, but in limited numbers, which magnified the importance of the credible nonpartisan citizen monitoring groups.

## Recommendations

Before the run-off elections, the CEC should ensure that procedures for voting by covid-affected individuals are broadly accessible, transparent, streamlined, and clearly communicated.

Over the long term, for voters who cannot access polling stations due to health, disability, travel, and/or residence abroad, the government, CEC and parliament should consider alternative procedures that maximize enfranchisement while safeguarding transparency, electoral integrity, and public health.

The parliament should make every effort to ensure that future changes to fundamental aspects of the electoral framework are enacted at least one year prior to election day. Changes should be made through meaningful consultative processes involving the full spectrum of political parties, election administrators, Georgian and international observer groups, and other electoral stakeholders to promote confidence.

To promote confidence in the integrity of election commissions, the parliament should consider adjusting the allocation formula for commissioners to enhance political balance and recalibrating the nomination criteria for professional members to reinforce nonpartisanship.

The parliament, government and CEC should consider approaches for streamlining complaints procedures, particularly related to the count and the results; establishing a more effective system for stakeholders to file complaints on election-day irregularities; and outlining clear rules for managing protocol reconciliations, particularly in the event of vote imbalances.

The parliament should consider amendments that would clarify the parameters for campaigning on social networks and other online platforms.

The government and parliament should consider developing a more comprehensive legal framework for regulating, overseeing, investigating, and publicizing campaign finance issues.

The government, CEC and parliament should revisit the mission of the IACFFE and consider whether a more effective, timely, impartial and responsive mechanism could be developed to respond and, as appropriate, apply sanctions in response to complaints about the misuse of administrative resources and voter bribery and intimidation.

## Campaign Environment

Despite the constraints imposed by covid-19, the campaign was open and pluralistic. Most parties described the environment as relatively calm compared to the 2016 parliamentary and 2018 presidential elections, although tensions rose as election day approached. The increase in proportional seats and reduced threshold for representation encouraged new parties to form and run. In total, 490 candidates, including 11 independents, ran in majoritarian districts. In addition, 48 parties and two coalitions presented proportional lists, an increase from 19 parties and six blocs in 2016. Twenty-five of these parties were participating in elections for the first time.

### *Campaigning*

The 40 signatories to the [code of conduct for political parties](#), mentioned above, pledged to respect the rule of law and the will of voters, avoid discrimination and hate speech, promote a peaceful electoral environment and campaign on issues.<sup>7</sup> While compliance with the code was uneven, most interlocutors considered its development to be a positive step, a useful accountability tool, and a constructive precedent for future elections.

In-person activities constituted the backbone of most campaigns. These included door-to-door canvassing, distributing printed materials, and convening public meetings. CSOs and media representatives reported that covid-19 safety measures, such as social distancing and masks, were inconsistent at many events. After public criticism of one such rally, subsequent events tended to be smaller and more compliant with covid-19 protocols. Some larger rallies in urban areas with high infection rates were cancelled. Others were transformed into “car rallies.”

Parties and candidates had uneven access to news coverage on television due to the politically polarized system of media ownership and management (discussed in more detail below). Only the campaigns of the largest and most established parties, including GD and UNM, received regular coverage through news programming and talk shows through their politically-aligned outlets. However, parties that qualified for public funding (those with representation in the parliament or that received 3 percent of the vote in either the last parliamentary or local elections) received free air time on the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) and private media outlets. They also received public funds to use for paid political ads. The smaller parties that qualified for public funding reported relying almost exclusively on this resource for their television advertising. Those parties that did not qualify for public funding described being largely excluded from television exposure, with the exception of free air time on GPB.

<sup>7</sup> Central Election Commission, “Political Party Code of Conduct For the 2020 Parliamentary Elections,” September 29, 2020, <https://cesko.ge/res/docs/Parties-2020Eng29.09.pdf>.

The role of social media was most prominent in the final days of the campaign. Parties conveyed to NDI that they believed in-person campaigning to be more effective in reaching voters, especially those outside of urban areas. As a result, for much of the campaign, social media was used largely to amplify in-person activities. Primarily through Facebook, but also platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, parties shared videos of campaign events and appearances by party leaders, interviews and speeches, get-out-the-vote videos, and ads. Messaging apps like Viber and Telegram were also used to keep in touch with supporters.

Although all parties and candidates affirmed that they had clear policy platforms and programs, domestic observers and media reported that policy issues did not feature prominently in campaigns, which frequently focused more on attacking their rivals. In addition, platforms rarely proposed concrete and distinct policy solutions. All parties acknowledged the importance of the economy, a perennial concern made worse by the effects of the pandemic. Education, judicial reform, and Euro-Atlantic integration also featured as common themes. Some of the newer and smaller parties emphasized topics such as increases in social security payments, pension reform and improvements in the justice system in an effort to differentiate themselves as a “third” alternative in a space dominated by GD and UNM. In the final week of the campaign, GD resorted to fear-based tactics, accusing opponents of violent and revolutionary intentions.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Violence and Intimidation***

Violence and intimidation have no place in democratic society or an election. Commendably, government and political leaders made repeated public statements instructing public servants and party activists to avoid violence and provocations. However, some parties, media outlets, and CSOs reported incidents of violence. In an [October 29 joint report](#), ISFED, TI-Georgia, and the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics identified 20 cases. These encompassed incidents in Marneuli, Bolnisi, Tbilisi, and Dmanisi that included gunshots, rock throwing, and physical and verbal assaults.<sup>9</sup>

The October 29 joint CSO report cited more than 80 instances of intimidation and threats. Several opposition parties reported persistent surveillance of their campaign activities, including videotaping of supporters and “tailing” of candidates, allegedly by state security service personnel. Targets interpreted these actions as attempts to intimidate them and their supporters. At least two women candidates received threats of blackmail through disclosure of details of their private lives.

### ***Abuse of State Resources***

As in previous elections, concerns about abuse of state or administrative resources and voter bribery dominated discussions with interlocutors. CSOs reported extensively on these issues. TI-Georgia noted that the practice of ruling party candidates appearing at events funded from the state or local budget, in effect using them as campaign events, had become a trend. Such cases were recorded throughout the country.<sup>10</sup> GYLA reported on GD candidates giving speeches at the state-funded season opening event of the Kutaisi State Drama Theater.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, CSOs and opposition parties noted that some government assistance programs for covid-affected citizens, for example, were presented in a way that blurred the distinction

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<sup>8</sup> Agenda.ge, “Ruling party says UNM has ‘revolutionary headquarter’ along with official, election headquarters,” October 28, 2020, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/3338>.

<sup>9</sup> ISFED, TI-Georgia, Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, “Joint Assessment of the Pre-Election Environment of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections,” October 29, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/joint-assessment-pre-election-environment-2020-parliamentary-elections>; and ISFED, “2020 Parliamentary Elections, Fourth Interim Election Report of Pre-Election Monitoring (September 6 - 28),” September 29, 2020, <https://isfed.ge/eng/angarishebi/2020-tslis-saparlamento-archevnebis-monitoringis-IV-shualeduri-angarishi>.

<sup>10</sup> TI-Georgia, “Misuse of Administrative Resources during Georgia’s 2020 Parliamentary Elections (Interim Report),” October 26, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/misuse-administrative-resources-during-georgias-2020-parliamentary-elections-interim-report>.

<sup>11</sup> GYLA, “Long-Term Observation Mission - 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia - Third Interim Report,” October 30 2020, <https://www.gyla.ge/en/post/saiam-2020-tslis-saparlamento-archevnebis-grdzelvadiani-sadamkvirveblo-misiis-mesame-shualeduri-angarishi-moamzada#sthash.LVsFZwCv.dpbs>.

between the state and GD, creating the impression among recipients that the support was provided by the party. According to GYLA, large scale projects, such as internet distribution, which received private and foreign funding, were also described in a manner that credited the party and its leadership during the pre-election period.<sup>12</sup> A GD practice of hiring temporary party “coordinators” in communities was criticized as creating a perception of voter bribery. The October 29 joint CSO report alleged more than 60 instances of political parties and candidates inappropriately distributing goods or providing services to voters. CSOs also highlighted political pressure on civil servants to support the governing party. For example, ISFED noted that school and kindergarten teachers are considered one of the most important human resources for political parties and are frequently pressured into participating in campaign activities, primarily by the ruling party.<sup>13</sup>

## Recommendations

### **Before the run-off elections:**

- Campaigns should make every effort to safeguard public health as they conduct outreach to voters.
- Party leaders and candidates should renew their campaigns’ commitments to the code of conduct, and follow its guidance.

Parties and candidates in future elections should refrain from campaigning based on personalities and negative attacks and instead communicate clear policy solutions to voters’ concerns.

Parties and candidates should ensure that their commitment to complying with laws, including renouncing abuses of administrative resources, violence, and voter intimidation and bribery -- both in person and online -- are communicated and followed at all levels of party administration, including establishment of internal sanctions for violations and a culture of accountability.

Authorities should, in a timely and impartial manner, investigate and, as appropriate, prosecute to the full extent of the law all cases of violence, intimidation, voter bribery, and abuses of state resources, including pressure on public servants and employees of state-affiliated institutions and enterprises.

## Gender and Inclusion

In the past year, Georgia took significant steps toward promoting greater inclusion and diversity in politics. The new gender quota and lower threshold for achieving proportional representation in the legislature allowed “new faces” to enter parliament. However, despite this progress, women, ethnic and religious minorities, persons with disabilities and LGBTI+ communities remain underrepresented in the new parliament, as in other aspects of political life. In addition, most parties lack detailed policy strategies to promote inclusion or address priority issues of marginalized groups, by addressing their interests as constituents and cultivating them as leaders with substantive roles to play in shaping Georgia’s democratic progress.

<sup>12</sup> GYLA, “Long-Term Observation Mission - 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia - Second Interim Report,” September 2020, <https://gyla.ge/en/post/saiam-2020-tslis-saparlamento-archevnebis-grdzelvadiani-sadamkvirveblo-misiis-meore-shualeduri-angarisshi-moamzada#sthash.5bcoujeg.ejcV4lWk.dpbs>.

<sup>13</sup> ISFED, “2020 Parliamentary Elections, Fourth Interim Election Report of Pre-Election Monitoring (September 6 - 28),” September 29, 2020, <https://isfed.ge/eng/angarishebi/2020-tslis-saparlamento-archevnebis-monitoringis-IV-shualeduri-angarisshi>.

## ***Gender***

In July 2020, the parliament introduced a mandatory one-in-four gender quota for party lists. The quota becomes one-in-three starting with the October 2028 parliamentary elections, and expires after 2032. Parties that exceeded the quota and entered parliament are qualified for additional state funding. The bonus funding is required to be spent on supporting parties' women's wings, although no enforcement mechanism was provided.

GD and UNM met the minimum requirements of the quota, but generally placed women in lower positions within each block of four. However, 29 parties, including EG, Democratic Movement-United Georgia, For Justice, Alliance of Patriots and Strategy Aghmashenebeli, nominated women for at least one in three positions on their lists. In the proportional race, at least 28 women will be seated.

Majoritarian seats were not subject to the quota and many of the more prominent parties appeared to place less emphasis on nominating women for these seats. For example, GD named only one woman as a majoritarian candidate, while Lelo nominated 8, EG nominated 5, Alliance of Patriots nominated 4 and UNM nominated 3. In total, 107 women ran as majoritarian candidates (less than 22 percent of all majoritarian candidates). While no women majoritarian candidates earned seats in the first round, three will be contesting in the runoffs.

The current legislature includes 21 women, so the composition of the new parliament is likely to represent a modest increase.

While candidate selection processes vary by party, overall they lack transparency, equal competition and clear criteria, which makes it difficult for women to compete on a level playing field. These challenges are rooted in broader party decision making processes that are overwhelmingly dominated by men.

Although women make up close to 54 percent of the electorate, little effort is made to determine how men and women may be impacted differently by proposed policies on the full range of issues that interest Georgians. To the extent that political party platforms address gender, it is to reference narrowly defined topics such as maternity benefits, gender-based violence, and economic empowerment, and infrequently in the context of proposing detailed policy solutions. Furthermore, these topics were rarely discussed in campaign discourse.

In addition to serving as candidates, Georgian women were actively engaged in a wide range of campaign activities as party activists and coordinators. They also served in large numbers as election commission members. In fact, women participated in election commissions at the district and precinct levels to a much higher degree than men, making up approximately 66 percent of all commission members at the DEC and PEC level. Although the CEC chairperson is a woman, the overall percentage of women on the Commission is only 25 percent. The CEC reported that more than 56 percent of the accredited election observers were women.

## ***Ethnic and Religious Minorities***

Ethnic minorities' engagement in politics as candidates, constituents, and activists remains limited. Making up approximately 13 percent of the population, their disengagement and isolation begins far ahead of elections. Georgian news broadcasts are not disseminated in Azerbaijani or Armenian languages, leaving the population reliant on external sources of information from Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia or Russia. News about domestic politics and issues is thus difficult for these populations to access, impacting their ability to engage in elections. They take part in the process as voters and election administration officials, but their involvement in shaping party programs and serving as candidates is modest. October 27 [analysis](#) by the Center for Human Rights Education and Monitoring (EMC) characterized parties' approaches to the needs



of ethnic minorities as “superficial,” often focusing on language training and ending discrimination, but neglecting to engage the communities in meaningful participation.<sup>14</sup>

The regional conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh complicated the engagement of ethnic minorities in these elections. The hostilities shifted the attention of the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities residing in Georgia toward events south of the border.<sup>15</sup>

Seventeen ethnic-minority candidates ran in majoritarian districts with large Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, including Marneuli/Gardabani and Akhalkalaki/Ninotsminda, but none ran elsewhere in Georgia. Sixteen of these majoritarian candidates also appeared on party proportional lists, although none were included in the top 20 positions of major parties. According to the CEC’s preliminary results, five were elected (three from GD and two from UNM). The same candidates from these communities tend to stand for election year after year. Little effort is made to put forward fresh faces, for example by engaging with young ethnic minority activists in candidate selection or issue development. The Labour Party included a candidate from an ethnic minority in the number 19 position on its list and EG ran a prominent Georgian Muslim candidate in Adjara. No major party nominated an ethnic minority woman as a candidate, although three ran for smaller parties.

By contrast, the CEC, through its ethnic minority working groups, put in place an array of materials and initiatives to promote voter education and engagement. There were 710 Azerbaijani- and 840 Armenian-speaking PEC members in minority populated areas. PEC and DEC members were offered materials in Azerbaijani and Armenian. Ballots in Azerbaijani and Armenian were provided to 213 precincts in minority-populated areas. Content on the CEC’s website is provided in Georgian, English and Abkhazian, with a special page in Azerbaijani and Armenian. However, despite these efforts, NDI found that many interlocutors in ethnic minority areas remained unaware of the details of the health crisis and the precautions put in place to ensure safe voting.

### ***Persons with Disabilities***

Political parties pay little attention to the needs, requirements and issues of persons with physical, intellectual and/or sensory disabilities. Some political parties mentioned persons with disabilities in their programs, but the tendency is to focus exclusively on medical or assistance needs, rather than elaborating clear policies for disability rights or inclusion.

The CEC has taken steps to ensure the participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral process. Stakeholders generally positively assessed the Commission’s working group on persons with disabilities, various efforts to facilitate their access to election information and the newly introduced online course for election officials on how to support their independent electoral participation. A new temporary amendment allowed citizens who use wheelchairs to access a [website](#) to review pictures and descriptions of 1,125 polling stations identified as “accessible” (approximately 30 percent of the total) and to register at a precinct that meets their needs. However, with no clear standards in place, disability rights groups raised concerns about whether the polling stations were sufficiently accessible. As of October 25, only 14 wheelchair users had made use of this option. CSOs representing persons with disabilities suggested that the low usage may have been due to pandemic-related health concerns and a preference for the mobile ballot box option. The CEC also worked with the Union for the Blind to develop a tactile frame for voters, a process made more complicated by the increased number of electoral contestants in 2020 compared to previous years. However, on election day, not all PECs were equipped with tactile ballots and some PEC members were unfamiliar with the process for using them. Members of the deaf community faced challenges in accessing information about electoral candidates. Sign-language interpretation is offered several times a day on GPB\* but is

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<sup>14</sup> EMC, “Ethnic Minority Rights in Parties’ Pre-Election Visions - 2020,” October 27, 2020, <https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/etnikuri-umtsiresobebis-uflebebi-partiebis-tsinasaarchevno-khedvebshi-2020>.

<sup>15</sup> PMMG, “Media Monitoring Interim Findings: Reflection of Military Confrontation in Mountainous Karabakh in Interethnic Relations Taken Place Between Ethnic Armenians and Azeris Residing in Georgia - September 27 - October 26, 2020,” October 2020.

\* Corrected on 11/10/2020 based on information provided by GPB.

unavailable on other outlets. The CEC, however, ensured that all of its informational videos were translated into sign language.

## **LGBTI+**

In previous election years, homophobic rhetoric was used liberally to appeal to conservative voters. Commendably, these homophobic themes were largely absent from campaigns this year. As of October 28, eight parties had agreed to sign an interparty memorandum on LGBTI+ rights that condemns the use of homophobic language in elections and urges political parties to protect LGBTI+ rights and safety. However, progress stopped short of parties nominating any openly LGBTI+ candidates. According to analysis of party platforms by EMC, while GD, UNM and the Labour Party did not mention LGBTI+ people among the minority groups in their platforms, and parties like EG and Strategy Aghmashnebeli made only superficial mention of this community, some parties went further in recognizing their rights and interests.<sup>16</sup> Lelo, for example, highlighted the importance of the rights of assembly and expression for LGBTI+ groups, recognized the needs of transgender people as a distinct group, discussed the socioeconomic needs of the community, and suggested preventive measures to address the violence often faced by LGBTI+ citizens.<sup>17</sup> In another positive development, this year, Lelo, EG and representatives from UNM recognized the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia.

## **Recommendations**

Political parties should develop more transparent and democratic candidate selection processes, place women higher on the candidate lists within groups of three or four, and support women in leadership positions once in office. Those that received bonus funding for exceeding the quota should dedicate it to initiatives that promote gender mainstreaming and empower women within their organizations.

Parties should acknowledge and identify internal obstacles to women's participation and consider changing internal behaviors and practices, including working hours and decision-making processes, in order to promote women's engagement and leadership.

Parties should reconsider the gender quota sunset clause. Promoting a balance between men and women is a long term process that should not have an expiration date so early into implementation.

The government and CEC, in consultation with disability rights groups, should reach a common understanding of the required parameters for accessibility, conduct a review of available precincts prior to the next election, and ensure all commission members receive appropriate training.

<sup>16</sup> EMC, "Equality Policy in Parties' Pre-Election Visions - 2020," October 23, 2020, <https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/tanastorobis-politika-partiebis-tsinasaarchevno-khedvebshi-2020>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

All media outlets should consider offering sign language interpretation, as well as Armenian and Azerbaijani translation, of all election related programs. Funds should be devoted to enabling increased minority language broadcasts.

Parties should collaborate with marginalized groups to develop solution-oriented programs that not only acknowledge, but address the issues of Georgia's diverse population, including women, ethnic minorities, LGBTI+, and persons with disabilities.

Parties should seek to advance ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities and LGBTI+ individuals as leaders and future candidates.

In their future campaign communications, parties and candidates should consider issuing statements in support of equality and anti-discrimination.

## Media and Information

### *Television*

Most Georgians get their news from television. However, while the media landscape is diverse and vocal, most of the major broadcasters are politically aligned, resulting in highly polarized news coverage. Indeed, NDI research shows that the majority of Georgians consider television broadcasts to be biased.<sup>18</sup> Party representatives across the spectrum noted the challenges of accessing media outlets with which they are not politically aligned. The GPB is mandated to provide impartial news coverage, but its audience is limited and opposition parties question its neutrality. These obstacles impeded voters' ability to make informed electoral choices.

Concerns about the media's partisanship were bolstered by several prominent cases of senior media representatives openly espousing political lines in the run-up to the elections. The then deputy director of Imedi TV was recorded stating that its journalists should be focused on discrediting UNM and the director of the Mtavari TV station, which is seen as pro-opposition. Five journalists at Imedi TV resigned in May after determining they did not have the journalistic freedom to report on issues that might paint the government in a negative light. Representatives of Mtavari and Pos TV were also publicly critical of opponents of the parties that they support. Several political leaders have threatened to shut down disfavored TV stations if they come to power.

NDI noted with concern reports of violence or threats of violence targeting journalists. These included the physical assault of an Mtavari TV reporter and of a GPB cameraman in Marneuli. Radio Way in Pankisi was also forced to close its offices and broadcast from a neighboring location following threats of property destruction. There was some concern that violence against journalists may be underreported due to a historic lack of response.

Public debates among candidates were limited in the lead up to the elections. Many leading candidates from across the spectrum chose not to participate, citing mistrust of media platforms' willingness to conduct an impartial forum. Collectively, this was a missed opportunity for Georgian voters to compare and contrast candidates, and may have contributed to perceptions that party platforms and policies were not well understood by the public and that party affiliations were largely personality-driven.

<sup>18</sup> NDI, "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of December 2019 Survey," January 16, 2020, <https://www.ndi.org/publications/results-december-2019-public-opinion-polls-georgia-0>.

The Georgian National Communications Commission (ComCom) is charged with regulating broadcasting and electronic communications, including monitoring the media environment for violations of the electoral code. Revisions to the code for these elections contributed to transparency around the complaints process. CSOs and opposition parties reported that confidence in the Commission is generally low, but some interlocutors shared the view that it played a more constructive and impartial role in these elections than in previous cycles.

### ***Online Platforms***

Information manipulation is a significant cause for concern in Georgia, and online disinformation around elections has been particularly salient. False or misleading information concerning covid-19, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, disputes over the border delimitation between Azerbaijan and Georgia, and ethnic minorities circulated ahead of the elections, potentially as part of attempts to influence voter choices. In addition, some interlocutors noted that accusations of spreading disinformation had themselves become a tactic to discredit rival campaigns. Interlocutors tended to concur that homegrown information manipulation appeared to be a larger problem in these elections than disinformation from abroad. Some noted that hate speech online seemed less pervasive than in previous elections.

Oversight of online content is covered by the Georgian criminal code and laws on electronic communications, data protection, and copyrights, with no one government entity having comprehensive accountability. The SAO is responsible for providing oversight of campaign spending, including on online political ads, despite difficulties in attributing anonymous, partisan posts to political actors. Interlocutors at the SAO also noted that a persistent challenge in assessing online spending is that many parties do not differentiate between online and traditional media in their financial declarations. Another difficulty is online spending on behalf of campaigns by separate organizations (“third parties”). In the final days of the campaign, the SAO launched an investigation of an organization that took out Facebook ads discrediting UNM, on the grounds that these potentially constituted illegal campaign donations to the party benefiting from the messaging. Overall, the limited and diffuse oversight of the online media space was a source of concern to some civic actors.

CSOs were actively engaged in monitoring and mitigating online disinformation. The Media Development Foundation (MDF) and Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) for example, were part of a nonpartisan third party partnership with Facebook to identify and label posts containing disinformation.

ISFED engaged in regular social media monitoring during the pre-election period and reported repeatedly on instances of coordinated inauthentic behavior that was apparently aimed at discrediting campaigns or inflaming social tensions. It identified 69 anonymous Facebook pages that systematically spread false or discrediting narratives about parties and candidates, both pro-government and opposition. GD-supporting pages appeared to have a coordinated focus. They grouped most opposition parties under the UNM umbrella, and warned of civil strife should they return to power. Those targeting GD seemed less coordinated and often shared posts from other pages or profiles that are critical of the current authorities. ISFED also identified a campaign to disseminate information favoring the Alliance of Patriots and discredit other parties through a network of 12 accounts, and, through earlier monitoring efforts, a network of 34 pages associated with Alt-Info, a self-proclaimed alternative news source that, according to ISFED's analysis, spreads anti-liberal, -Western, -immigrant and -LGBTI+ propaganda.<sup>19</sup> During the weekend of October 24-25, it appeared that Facebook removed some of the accounts and pages associated with the Alt-Info network.

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<sup>19</sup> ISFED, “Social Media Monitoring Report - 2020 Parliamentary Elections - First Interim Report,” October 1, 2020, <https://isfed.ge/eng/angarishebi/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringis-1-shualeduri-angarishi-2020-tslis-saparlamento-archevnebi>; and “Social Media Monitoring Report - 2020 Parliamentary Elections - Second Report,” October 26, 2020, <https://isfed.ge/geo/angarishebi/201026065446sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi-meore-shualeduri-angarishi>.

In June, more than 50 Georgian CSOs drafted and signed an open letter to Facebook recommending specific actions to improve the online information environment based on findings from media monitoring efforts conducted around the 2018 presidential election. In response, in early August Facebook made a political ads library available, required authorization for any election or political-related ads and limited possibilities for placing ads from abroad. These efforts helped to increase transparency around campaign financing and online advertising.

## Recommendations

Authorities should, in a timely and impartial manner, investigate allegations of violence or intimidation targeting journalists or media outlets and, as appropriate, prosecute them to the full extent of the law.

To address the polarization of the media landscape, the government and parliament should consider ways to enhance the independence and reach of the GPB and international donors should consider increased support to regional media and independent broadcasters.

The rules and regulations around debate opportunities and participation should be reviewed on a cross party basis with the participation of media and civil society.

To safeguard voters' access to balanced and reliable information, political parties and candidates should participate in all available debates and political programs to present their policies and plans to the public.

Through a consultative process, the parliament should consider a regulation framework for campaigning on social and online media that encompasses best practices for protecting freedom of expression while safeguarding citizens' access to reliable information. Digital platforms, especially Facebook and social media popular in Georgia, should establish or increase their in-country presence around elections in order to ensure contextual awareness and rapid response to complaints.

The government, political parties, CSOs, journalists and online platforms should continue and expand efforts to detect and mitigate disinformation in the elections, and should implement long-term strategies to strengthen information integrity and community resilience.



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