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GEORGIA ELECTIONS DOMINATED BY NATIONAL-LEVEL RHETORIC, OVERSHADOWING LOCAL CONCERNS

Elections generally well administered but complaints of voter and candidate intimidation remained

Tbilisi, Georgia - According to an analysis of Georgia's October 2021 municipal elections issued today by the National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute), while the elections were generally well administered, deep flaws in the electoral and, significantly, the political environment, adversely affected the process. The municipal elections took place in the context of a protracted political impasse in the aftermath of 2020 parliamentary elections and were seen by many as a litmus test for Georgia's democratic path. While the municipal elections are typically the occasion for citizens to focus on local concerns and community leadership, the events of the previous year, including an expectation that snap parliamentary elections would be called if the ruling party did not reach 43 percent of the vote, raised the political stakes for all parties. Harsh rhetoric and exchanges of insults dominated the campaign period, while the focus on national-level narratives overshadowed local-level concerns. The responsibility for public skepticism is shared across the political spectrum as partisan gains appear to have been prioritized over the needs of the Georgian public.

Georgia's voters, election workers, and nonpartisan citizen election observers demonstrated their determination to ensure Georgia's continued democratic progress. There also were some improvements in electoral transparency, such as broadcasting CEC sessions and most interviews for nonpartisan DEC positions online, as well as publishing PEC-level data in a more accessible format. However, the process was marred by widespread allegations of misuse of administrative resources, vote-buying, and pressure and intimidation of voters, candidates, and journalists. As in previous years, imbalance in party resources, combined with insufficient oversight of campaign finance and undue advantages of incumbency, contributed to an unlevel playing field. Despite broadened political representation, increased transparency and an improved complaints process, opposition parties remained unconvinced of the political neutrality of non-partisan election commissioners. Polarized and politicized media limited voters' ability to make an informed choice. Reported attacks on the media and civil society on first and second round election days and attempts to restrict their ability to operate freely negatively impacted the overall process. Inclusion of women and minorities, as well as other underrepresented groups, remains a challenge. Despite the fact that gender quotas played a significant role in the large increase in women's representation on proportional lists, very few women ran or were elected to majoritarian seats: the number of women majoritarians elected in 2021 is 0.4 percent (37 women) less than in the 2014 elections.

Public faith in democratic institutions and processes continues to be undermined by the approach of political actors before, during and after elections. It is a political imperative that, in the period between elections, elected representatives fulfill their responsibility to represent the interests of voters. Those who occupy the seats of government bear particular responsibility to bring about inclusive, pluralistic exchange, which is essential to responsive governance that improves people's lives. Good faith efforts to work across the political divide and internal political reflection are required to ensure public confidence in the democratic political process ahead of the next electoral cycle.

Recommendations

In the spirit of international cooperation, the NDI offers the following recommendations to Georgian stakeholders and stands ready to assist in their implementation:

- Political parties should carry out good faith efforts to work across the political divide and fulfill their responsibility to represent the interest of the voters to ensure public confidence in the democratic political process ahead of the next electoral cycle.
- Accountability measures should be implemented to ensure that authorities act impartially during the election period and prevent the misuse of administrative resources. Law enforcement agencies should investigate credible cases of voter and candidate intimidation and harassment.
- To enhance the transparency and oversight of campaign finance, a state entity should be responsible for systematically verifying all possible breaches of the rules of financing political campaigns, including potential illegal incomes, undeclared expenditures, and third-party spending. Analysis of financial reporting should also be conducted and available to the public in a timely manner.
- In order to provide voters with an informed choice, a broad and comprehensive review of the media regulations and practices during elections should be undertaken to address challenges identified, including those related to violence against journalists, media coverage of elections, media access to electoral contestants, and candidate debates.
- Political parties should more actively engage the public between elections and through inclusive campaign structures to ensure platforms and issues are reflective of citizen concerns. They should develop their political programs and platforms around key public priorities and offer a clear position on how they would work to implement the solutions;
- As NDI previously recommended, all stakeholders should respect the purpose of genuine, impartial citizen observation. Civic activism may fulfill its role only if it remains free from undue influence and pressure from the government and other political actors in the post-election period and throughout future election cycles. For their part, all nonpartisan citizen election monitoring organizations, other non-governmental organizations and media should pursue their activities with evidence-based methodologies, politically impartial analysis, robust engagement with electoral and other authorities, and communication with the public to enhance the integrity of Georgia's electoral and political processes.

Background

The Limited Long Term Election Assessment was part of NDI's multi-track program for the October 2, 2021, municipal elections. Additionally, in late August NDI sponsored an [international team of experts](#) to conduct a series of online, high-level meetings with political parties, government officials, civil society, and local media to demonstrate continued support for Georgia's democratic development and reinforce the international community's expectation that all parties will adhere to the principles of genuine democratic elections and political processes. Closer to election day, NDI also deployed [a team of experts](#) who held high level meetings to assess progress ahead of election day and reinforce a message of constructive engagement around the elections.

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NDI's international election integrity program was conducted in accordance with Georgian law and the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation*. The Institute has observed over 250 elections across the globe in its 35 year history, including every national election since Georgia's independence in 1991. This program has been made possible with the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS).

NDI is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental organization that works in partnership around the world to strengthen and safeguard democratic institutions, processes, norms and values to secure a better quality of life for all. NDI envisions a world where democracy and freedom prevail, with dignity for all.