



Limited Long Term Election Assessment 2021 Municipal Elections in Georgia

Election Assessment Report
September 1 - November 5, 2021

Summary

Georgia's October 2021 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 its 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. As international observer groups have remarked, while the elections were competitive and generally well administered, deep flaws in the electoral environment adversely affected the process, resulting in a missed opportunity to reduce polarization and increase confidence in the broader political process.

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. However, the process was marred by widespread allegations of misuse of administrative resources, vote-buying, and pressure and intimidation of voters, candidates, and journalists. Harsh rhetoric and exchanges of insults only deepened the already polarized politics, while the focus on national-level issues overshadowed local-level concerns. 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. Stakeholders' trust in the election administration remained low, despite broadened political representation, increased transparency and an improved complaints process. These measures failed to convince opposition parties 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. While some progress was made, largely due to implementation of quotas, inclusion of women and minorities, as well as other underrepresented groups, remains a challenge.

Public faith in democratic institutions and processes continues to be undermined by the approach of political actors before, during and after elections. 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. 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 National Democratic Institute (NDI, or the Institute) offers the following recommendations to Georgian stakeholders and stands ready to assist in their implementation:

In the post-election period, political parties should actively seek to reduce hyper-polarization and engage in legislative and governance processes that are inclusive and responsive to improving people's lives.

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.

The legal framework should be comprehensively reviewed well ahead of the next election through broad public consultations and political agreements.

All stakeholders should continue and intensify their work on more inclusive electoral and political processes to ensure equal opportunities and representation of all Georgian citizens.

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.

The Prosecutor's Office should thoroughly investigate all attacks on journalists and prosecute perpetrators in a timely manner. Consider amending the Georgian Criminal Code to more precisely define or expand the definition of what constitutes interference or acts of violence against journalists.

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. Efforts at legislating free speech during campaigns set a dangerous precedent and should be avoided.

National broadcasters and other media outlets should ensure impartial coverage of all electoral subjects during the pre-election campaign. Likewise, electoral contestants should grant access to national and regional media outlets and participate in debates to help voters make an informed choice in advance of election day.

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;

In order to promote inclusion and local-level participation, political parties should define and develop clear and transparent criteria and selection process for nominating candidates.

As NDI previously recommended, all stakeholders should respect the purpose of genuine, impartial citizen observation. Civic activism may fulfil 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.

Introduction

In late August, NDI launched a multi-track electoral integrity program for the October 2, 2021 municipal elections in Georgia. As part of this program, the Institute deployed a team of four international election experts who followed the electoral process from September 1 to November 5, 2021. The limited long-term election assessment mission focused on several key themes, including election administration, the campaign environment, the information environment, and gender and inclusion. Over the course of their engagement, analysts conducted over 200 online and in-person meetings and interviews with electoral stakeholders at national and local levels, including political party representatives, candidates, election and government officials, civil society representatives, international and Georgian observers, members of diplomatic community and the media.

Leading up to the October 2 municipal elections, the protracted political impasse and attacks on civil society and media by government actors raised concerns among the Georgian public and international community about the Georgian government and opposition political party leadership's continued prioritization of domestic political victories over their commitment to a democratic, Euro-Atlantic path. Georgian interlocutors raised concerns about lax or selective enforcement of electoral regulations, and abuses of state resources and prosecutorial authorities. Following the violent events of July 5, there were also elevated concerns about the ability of civil society and media to operate freely and express diverse viewpoints. Allegations of harassment and intimidation of opposition party members and candidates were also pervasive. In late July, Georgian Dream (GD) withdrew from the European Union-brokered Charles Michel or April 19 agreement on electoral and judicial reform that also envisaged early parliamentary elections in 2022 should GD fail to reach 43 percent in the municipal polls. For over four months, the United National Movement (UNM) party had abstained from signing the agreement, stating it disagreed with the amnesty provisions for those convicted following the June 2019 protests against Russian politicians' presence in the Georgian parliament. GD justified its withdrawal by pointing to the failure of other parties to sign, blaming the opposition, notably UNM, for "manufacturing an artificial political crisis" and accusing other parties of "constantly violating" the agreement. UNM signed the agreement on September 2 and used it as a key campaign message.

Legal Framework

Overall, the Georgian legal framework supports the conduct of democratic elections, although some challenges remain. Elections for 64 municipal councils (sakrebulo) and mayors are primarily regulated by the Electoral Code, which underwent extensive amendments in June 2021, following the April 19 agreement. The amendments introduced changes to the electoral system, increasing the number of sakrebulo members elected through the proportional list system from 970 to 1,404 and decreasing the number of councilors elected through a majoritarian system from 1,088 to 664. The threshold for majoritarian candidates was set at 40 percent and the threshold for proportional lists reduced from four to three percent nationwide and to 2.5 percent in Tbilisi. It also set new rules for the appointment of election commission members, facilitated access to dispute resolution, prohibited tracking of voters in the vicinity of polling stations and introduced mandatory random recounts of votes cast.

The amendments were adopted as a result of a broad political consensus and generally assessed positively, although stakeholders repeatedly emphasized the importance of political will in ensuring the fair and impartial implementation of the law and their lack of trust in the institutions responsible for this. Some also pointed out that the changes left important issues unaddressed. These relate, among other things, to existing restrictions on submitting complaints and insufficient regulations governing the oversight of campaign finance. In addition, the new district boundaries resulted in significant differences in the weight of the vote within some constituencies. More importantly, Georgia has a history of changing the electoral framework close to elections. The continuation of this practice negatively affects legal stability and may disadvantage newer entrants to the political race who have fewer resources to adapt to a changing set of rules.

Political and Campaign Environment

The overall political environment over the course of this election cycle was characterized by polarizing rhetoric and competing narratives, leaving little room for issue-based discussions. National issues and the potential impact of election results on Georgian politics dominated the campaigns, overshadowing local concerns that would be within the mandate of mayors or sakrebulo. UNM and other opposition parties sought to mobilize their voters by portraying the election as a referendum and campaigning on the April 19 agreement's 43 percent threshold. Their key messages included calls to "change the corrupt regime." GD argued that the opposition was focused on disrupting the electoral process and plunging the country into a political crisis. Its messages promoted past government achievements and future public investments or social assistance programs, frequently blurring the line between the party and the state. Vast disparities in available resources, along with the undue advantages of incumbency, resulted in an unlevel playing field.

Leaked files allegedly revealing the State Security Services' wiretapping of clergy, politicians, civil society, media representatives and foreign diplomats, as well as numerous other individuals several weeks ahead of elections further contributed to public mistrust in the impartiality of state institutions. An [International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy \(ISFED\) survey](#) revealed that over 40 percent of citizens did not believe that their vote was secret.

A total of 43 political parties and 68 initiative groups participated in the municipal elections, demonstrating the pluralism of the political space. GD fielded candidates for all electoral races across the country, while several opposition parties agreed to coordinate their candidacies in some districts. In total, there were 239 candidates for 64 mayors; 2,769 majoritarian candidates for 664 majoritarian sakrebulo seats and 770 proportional lists with 20,624 candidates for 1,404 proportional sakrebulo seats. A number of opposition parties claimed that their candidates were pressured to withdraw. Positively, to prevent withdrawals from leading to the deregistration of candidate lists, the Central Election Commission (CEC) decided to narrow the criteria triggering the deregistration of entire lists. According to CEC data, 14 proportional lists and over 600 proportional candidates withdrew before the elections, along with over 100 majoritarian and three mayoral candidates. None were from the ruling party.

Ahead of October 2 elections, the campaign environment was generally calm, although several isolated violent incidents were reported. Throughout the electoral period, opposition parties continued to allege widespread vote-buying, intimidation, and misuse of administrative resources. The state security services were notably accused of pressuring candidates, supporters or voters, raising concerns about the freedom of Georgians to run for office and choose their representatives without fear of retribution. Government announcements made in August of salary increases for public servants and mayors and large-scale infrastructural and social support programs (e.g. housing for internally displaced people [IDPs] or servicemen), while legal, failed to maintain a clear distinction between party and state and created perceptions of undue influence and abuse of state resources.

GD reports of violations primarily focused on the destruction or defacement of campaign materials, mostly posters and billboards, and on the opposition's alleged provocations, including perceptions that the opposition was attempting to discredit the election process and planning for unrest and rejection of results. They also released several reports accusing accredited observer groups of links with the opposition, portraying it as undeclared campaign contributions.

Due to covid-related concerns, ahead of the first round, most parties and candidates reported organizing small and medium size meetings, door-to-door canvassing and distribution of posters and fliers, depending on available resources. Thanks to its significant financial advantage, GD was by far the most visible political force as evidenced by its numerous billboards and banners, regular in-person gatherings held at the district and village levels, and its extensive online presence, notably on Facebook. GD campaign events frequently featured visits by national level officials (including the prime minister, ministers and MPs), who used GD events to announce various government projects, reportedly planned before the start of the election period. Most parties except GD reported having insufficient funds to run a full scale campaign in traditional media and resorted to free airtime or use of social media.

The return to Georgia and arrest of the former president Mikheil Saakashvili on October 1 dominated political discussions between the two election rounds. The event mobilized UNM supporters and is widely perceived to have influenced voter turnout and the election results by further perpetuating citizens' perception of the bipolar choices before them, despite the variety of parties running.

Campaign Finance

The State Audit Office (SAO) professionally conducted campaign finance oversight, but the current legal provisions seemed insufficient to reveal potentially serious or systemic abuses. A long standing issue, which NDI has highlighted in previous elections, is the SAO's lack of investigative powers and sufficient capacity to identify unreported income and expenditure. Many political parties and observer organizations raised concerns that the uneven playing field favored the ruling party and that the current legal and institutional framework failed to provide adequate campaign finance oversight. In line with the legal provisions, but limiting transparency, the SAO overview of financial reports was released shortly ahead of the polls. According to the SAO's September 29 interim report, between August 2 and September 12, some 64 percent of all incomes and 69 percent of the expenditures were connected to GD. No other analysis was published before the runoffs. Under its legal mandate, the SAO initiated administrative proceedings in three cases, all of which are still pending.

Election Administration

The composition of the three-level election administration, encompassing the CEC, 73 district election commission (DECs) and over 3,600 precinct election commissions (PECs) was changed

from 12 to 17 members, broadening the political representation. The commissions are made up of eight non-partisan and up to nine political party-appointees.

The technical preparations for the elections were efficient, and the election administration respected all legal deadlines. The CEC made commendable efforts to enhance the transparency of its work. Positively, it broadcast its sessions and most interviews for nonpartisan DEC positions online. In response to previous recommendations, including by NDI, the CEC published Excel spreadsheets with PEC-level data for public consumption, and continuously updated the files based on recounts; these files make election data more open and accessible compared to formats published during previous elections. Nevertheless, the opposition alleged that the ruling party exercised direct control over non-partisan election commissioners and criticized the lack of genuine competition for non-partisan posts at the PEC level. Failure to appoint the CEC chairperson through a newly introduced consensus-based procedure and instead resorting to an anti-deadlock mechanism, which resulted in limiting the chairperson's term to six months, was frequently cited as evidence of the ruling party's unwillingness to establish an election administration that enjoys broad political support.

Election Day

Domestic and international observers reported that the first-round election day was professionally organized, without significant technical problems. However, the observer groups noted several procedural shortcomings and violations and several violent incidents were reported in or around polling stations. While recently introduced legal amendments prohibit tracking of voters in the vicinity of polling stations, pressure on voters by party coordinators, mostly allegedly from GD, was widely reported on election day. In many polling stations, persons registered as domestic observers were reportedly seen interfering in the voting and counting. For the first time, the vote count was video recorded at 3,200 polling stations and made available online. However, many recordings failed to offer a clear view of the counting process, which limited their usability. The CEC announced the first-round turnout to be 51.92 percent.

Results Protocols and Recounts

Despite the enhanced training, which was, in part, a consequence of concerns raised after last year's parliamentary elections, the PEC result protocols still contained many formal mistakes, arithmetic errors, and discrepancies. According to the CEC, in almost 27 percent of the proportional protocols, the number of votes cast differed from the number of signatures on the voter list, although 96 percent of the incidents affected fewer than 10 votes per polling station. In total, DEC's recounted the results from 812 polling stations, some 22 percent of the total, which is an unprecedentedly high number. This figure includes the recount of results from 360 randomly selected polling stations, 194 recounts based on DEC initiative or submitted complaints, and recounts of 258 polling stations identified as problematic on the CEC chairperson's initiative. While most stakeholders agreed that the election administration's decision to conduct a high number of recounts represents a positive step towards transparency, the significant discretionary power that remains with the DEC's risks

furthering concerns that DEC's inconsistently and arbitrarily selected the polling stations to recount. In some instances, the DEC's reportedly only recounted the invalid ballots, instead of conducting a full recount of all the votes cast. Late notification of key stakeholders about the timing of recounts also negatively impacted the overall transparency of the process.

Complaints and Appeals

Many stakeholders continued to question the impartiality of the election administration, courts, the prosecutor's office and the police. Still, for most stakeholders, recent legal amendments made the complaints and appeals process more accessible, allowing for the first time the electronic submission of complaints. The percentage of complaints rejected on procedural grounds diminished compared to previous elections, yet it remained high. In total, 446 complaints were submitted in the pre-electoral period, approximately 1,800 on or after the first round and approximately 500 on or after the runoffs, 2967 complaints in total. Approximately 66 percent (1958) of all the complaints were rejected on merit, 14.6 percent (432) have been dismissed on technical grounds, 9.4 percent (279) were fully and some 8.3 percent (245) were partially satisfied in favor of the complainant, 1.7 percent (50) were withdrawn and 3 complaints were sent to the relevant authorities/agencies for response.

First Round Results

On October 16, the election administration adopted the official results of the mayoral and sakrebulo elections. Overall, 17 parties crossed the threshold. GD received 46.7 percent of the national proportional vote, UNM 30.7 percent and Gakharia – For Georgia 7.8 percent and 14 other parties the rest. The official results were verified by the Georgian nonpartisan election monitoring organization ISFED, using a proven statistical methodology in a parallel vote tabulation (PVT). In majoritarian elections, out of 622 seats determined in the first round, GD won 557 seats, UNM 53 and others 12 seats. GD won all 44 mayoral elections where no second round was necessary. Runoffs were announced for 20 mayoral elections and 42 races for majoritarian sakrebulo members in 24 districts. The mayoral runoffs in 17 of 20 constituencies were held between GD and UNM candidates, while in three other constituencies GD candidates faced representatives of Gakharia For Georgia, Tamaz Mechiauri - For United Georgia, and an independent candidate.

Runoff Campaigns

Both the ruling party and the opposition ran highly divisive runoff campaigns, marked by exchanges of insults and calls for the dissolution of rival parties. To varying degrees both UNM and GD used runoffs as platforms for national politics.

Following the first round, UNM held several large-scale rallies, including in Tbilisi, Batumi, and Zugdidi, demanding recently detained former president Mikheil Saakashvili's release from prison and promoting coalition agreements with other opposition parties. The party continued to focus on

national issues and advocate for regime change, often through harsh rhetoric, but it also introduced more issue-based messaging on local needs and concerns, including free school meals, pension and scholarship increases, and land reform.

GD's campaign featured the prime minister, party chairman, and other high-ranking officials visiting municipalities. They continued to announce various government projects and assistance programs, including salary increases for public servants, increased veterans' pensions, and vouchers for socially vulnerable pensioners. Worryingly, the prime minister also declared that municipalities controlled by the opposition would not be able to function properly without the support of the central government and that voting for opposition candidates would hurt local communities. UNM interlocutors interpreted these statements as direct voter intimidation, while other stakeholders criticized the statements for undermining the principles of decentralization and local self-governance. GD officials' rhetoric was often inflammatory, comparing Saakashvili to Hitler, describing UNM as evil, or referring to UNM candidates as criminals and murderers.

Runoffs

The run-off election day was conducted in a relatively peaceful environment and without major procedural irregularities, although more frequent instances of confrontations in and around polling stations were reported. Observer groups raised concerns about the ability of voters to cast their ballots freely, reporting allegations of pressure on citizens to turn up to vote or attend party rallies; possible cases of vote-buying; parallel registration of incoming voters by party coordinators; undue interference in the procedures by persons registered as domestic observers and occasional violations of the voting procedures. Observers, media and opposition representatives also reported being obstructed in their work and in several instances expelled, threatened or attacked. The ruling party and UNM mutually accused each other of attempting to disrupt the process. On October 31, together with the preliminary results, the CEC published the turnout as 49.09 percent, some three percent lower than in the first round. Some domestic observers raised concerns that the irregularities they observed may have impacted final results, pointing to the narrow margins of victory in some constituencies.

Runoff Results and Recounts

According to the CEC results, GD won 19 out of 20 mayoral elections, with the UNM candidate winning in Tsalenjikha. Out of 42 majoritarian runoffs, GD won 27, UNM 7, For Georgia 6, and Free Georgia and European Socialists one each. Results in the majoritarian district runoffs indicate that both GD and UNM fell short of an absolute majority in the sakrebulo of Batumi, Zugdidi, Martvili, Chkhorotsku, Tsalenjikha and Rustavi. Either party will have to form a governing coalition with smaller parties in order to take control of these assemblies.

On October 31, UNM rejected the results, claiming that the elections were rigged and announcing protests and withdrawal from the parliament, but also pledging continued engagement in the complaints process through the election commissions and the courts.

On November 1, DEC conducted mandatory random recounts of 201 PECs, increasing the number of PECs included from five to seven in all districts except Martvili, where the commission decided against following the CEC chairman's recommendation. Subsequently, DEC also randomly selected and recounted 52 of the nearly 300 PECs where no recordings of the count were available, and six PECs based on their own initiative. Recounts of 274 PECs (out of 1,830 runoff PECs) revealed only minor discrepancies that did not affect the overall results.

[According to the CEC](#), 4.78 percent of the votes for majoritarian sakrebulo candidates and 2.96 percent of the votes for mayoral candidates were invalidated in the run-off election; this is a decrease from previous elections. Nevertheless, civil society raised concerns that some ballots were incorrectly or deliberately invalidated. The opposition demanded recounts of invalidated ballots in districts where the total number of invalid ballots was greater than the vote difference between the candidates.

Gender and Inclusion

The inclusion of women, national minorities, PWDs and other underrepresented groups in the electoral process remains inadequate. While many stakeholders commended the efforts of the election administration and civil society to address this issue, they also frequently pointed to political parties as gatekeepers. Groups advocating for the political participation of women, PWD, diverse lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) communities, and IDP communities recognized and lauded legislative improvements, but negatively assessed implementation, as well as the reduction of the mandatory gender quota from the initially stipulated one-in-two instead to one-in-three proportional list candidates, with the implementation of one-in-two quotas delayed until the 2028 elections. In addition, groups criticized political parties' inadequate approaches to including marginalized communities in decision-making and speaking to these communities in their platforms, programs and messages. The informal nature of candidate selection and decision-making in political parties is seen as a key barrier to inclusion.

The gender quota, which requires at least one in every three candidates in a party list be a woman, appears to have had a significant effect. Women made up 42.5 percent of proportional candidates (8,767 out of 20,624). Over 30 percent of proportionally-elected candidates are women, which constitutes a significant increase compared to 2017 municipal results when only 13 percent of all elected councillors were women. A woman was the first candidate in 18 percent of lists (141 of 771 lists). However, outside of proportional lists, women's representation was much lower. Women comprised ten percent (26 of 239) of the candidates in mayoral races, and approximately 17 percent (488 of 2,769) in majoritarian races. Of 56 independent majoritarian candidates, 7 were women (12.5 percent). Out of 64 newly-elected mayors, only 3 are women and out of 664 majoritarian sakrebulo members, 45 are women.

Women make up some 53 percent of voters. They were well-represented at the lower levels of the election administration (over 60 percent of DEC and PEC members) and remained underrepresented at the CEC (4 out of 17 members).

National minorities, which make up some 13 percent of the population, also remain underrepresented in political life and party programs and campaigns generally failed to address this. The CEC offered voter information, electoral materials and trainings in minority languages, but many stakeholders criticized the choice of communication channels used for informing national minority voters about the electoral process.

Media and Information Integrity

The Georgian media environment is characterized by pluralism and a diversity of opinions but mirrors the deep polarization of the country's political landscape. Interlocutors noted a declining media environment and increased challenges for journalists since 2020. Attacks on journalists by far-right groups during the Tbilisi Pride event in July brought to light the increased threats to the physical safety of journalists; and civil society activists also noted an increase in online attacks against media outlets and journalists critical of the government. [ISFED's social media monitoring](#) unit identified dozens of separate Facebook posts attacking journalists coming from anonymous networks and "trolls". These attacks are thought to be coordinated and reached a much larger scale than in 2020.

The most intense disinformation campaigns unfolded during the pre-election period, notably through false, misleading and manipulated content posted on Facebook by anonymous or inauthentic accounts. Campaigns were directed primarily at UNM, GD and For Georgia political leaders, candidates and other actors. Only a handful of false or misleading online stories were reportedly posted on October 2 election day and its aftermath. Among these later posts were false stories about exit polls by Edison Research and Ipsos being published before the vote had closed.

Media organizations were generally able to operate without fear or interference from local authorities or political party representatives. Nevertheless, on first and second round election days, a handful of journalists working for critical broadcasting organizations were confronted and threatened, notably in Tbilisi, Martvili, Poti, and Zugdidi. Additionally, media representatives reported difficulties in getting access to key stakeholders and campaign events, which undermined broadcasters' ability to provide balanced coverage and limited voters' access to a full spectrum of political views.

In the aftermath of the first round of the municipal elections, a group of 14 GD parliamentarians introduced legislation that would prohibit the distribution of pre-election advertisements aimed at creating negative attitudes towards an election subject or candidate. The bill would notably amend the Law on Broadcasting to make broadcasters and their clients liable for such content. Civil society organizations, opposition parties and broadcasters denounced the initiative as an assault on freedom of expression and an attempt to silence voices that are critical of the government. While an effort to curb negative campaigning could improve political discourse, legislating free speech during campaigns sets a dangerous precedent.

Debates

Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) organized two candidate debates as required by law. Notably, the UNM candidate Nika Melia walked out of the GPB mayoral candidates debate after criticizing its format and announcing his refusal to share a stage with Kakha Kaladze, GD candidate and incumbent mayor. Media representatives frequently reported difficulties securing the ruling party's participation in planned debates or talk shows, which often resulted in cancellations from other candidates. Lack of genuine debates between key contestants at the national and local levels negatively affected voters' ability to obtain substantive information about electoral choices and candidate positions on issues. Nevertheless, in a number of municipalities, local media and civic groups organized issue-based candidate discussions, mostly managing to secure participation of both the ruling party and the opposition representatives. At the discussions, political parties presented their plans to address public concerns, especially challenges faced by underrepresented groups such as women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWD), the elderly, and ethnic minorities.

Observers

The CEC accredited 100 citizen observer groups and 52 international organizations to monitor the elections. While the civil society sector is vibrant, Georgia has a long-lasting concern that many citizen observer organizations act on behalf of political parties, potentially diminishing public trust in genuine citizen observer efforts. Some domestic organizations, including the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), ISFED, and Transparency International (TI), carried out comprehensive pre-election and election day observation and reporting. The governing party, GD, issued various statements attempting to refute and discredit the findings of domestic observers. Many civil society organizations found it concerning that GD published lists of civil society organizations allegedly affiliated with the opposition.

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.