



**STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE
PRE-ELECTION DELEGATION TO GEORGIA**

Tbilisi, Georgia, February 25, 2024

INTRODUCTION

This statement is offered by an international delegation organized by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) which visited Georgia from February 19 to 25, 2024 in advance of parliamentary elections to be held in October. These will be Georgia's first elections since gaining European candidacy status and will be conducted under a new electoral system in which all parliamentary seats are allocated according to proportional representation and in which the president is indirectly elected. It will also feature the extensive use of new technology on election day. The delegation's purpose was to accurately and impartially assess the broader political environment within which the elections will take place; review electoral preparations already underway; offer practical recommendations to promote more inclusive, transparent and accountable elections; and to demonstrate the international community's support for credible elections and democratic governance in Georgia.

The delegation included: Ann Linde, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden; Ambassador Per Eklund, former Head of the European Union Delegation to Georgia; Michael Posner, former Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor at the U.S. Department of State; Daniel Gottfried, Legislative and Policy Analyst for Chairman Cardin at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; Eva Busza, NDI Regional Director for Eurasia; and Richard L. Klein, NDI Global Director of Elections.

The delegation carried out its work in accordance with the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation* and its accompanying *Code of Conduct for International Election Observers*¹, with reference to international and regional standards for elections (including opinions of the Venice Commission) and in compliance with Georgian laws. In line with the *Joint Communiqué on Co-operation between International and Citizen Observers*, the delegation coordinated with and was informed by citizen observer efforts. The delegation was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The delegation met with a wide array of government officials and election stakeholders, including: the Chair of the Central Election Commission (CEC), the President and the Prime Minister, the Deputy Minister of the Interior, the Head of the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), leaders of the ruling and opposition political parties, civic organizations, citizen observation organizations – including Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), Public Movement Multinational Georgia (PMMG), Transparency International - Georgia (TI-Georgia) –

¹ The *Declaration of Principles* and accompanying *Code of Conduct* were launched at the United Nations in 2005 and have been endorsed by 55 leading international election observer organizations.

representatives of state and private media from across the political spectrum, as well as diplomatic missions and development partners. The delegation expresses its deep appreciation for the warm welcome and for the insights shared by election stakeholders. These benefited the mission greatly.

NDI organized this pre-election delegation as part of a comprehensive international election observer mission (IEOM) for the 2024 parliamentary elections. The Institute will send a second pre-election delegation prior to election day to assess changes in the electoral environment, developments in election preparations, and progress made toward practical recommendations. The second pre-election delegation will also release a public report of its findings. Further, NDI will deploy a team of long term analysts to assess critical electoral issues, and then a delegation for election day to observe voting and counting and issue a preliminary statement on the electoral process. Once the 2024 election process is complete a comprehensive final report will be issued.

The delegation offers its pre-election findings and recommendations in the spirit of supporting Georgian efforts to strengthen their elections and democratic institutions. Ultimately, it will be the people of Georgia who will determine the meaning and credibility of their elections and the country's democratic development.

OVERVIEW

Georgia's parliamentary elections scheduled for October 26, 2024 will be the first since the country attained EU candidacy status in December 2023. As reflected in Article 78 of the Constitution, Georgians from across the political spectrum express a clear desire to join the European Union (EU) and see EU approval of their candidacy status as a positive step forward. As part of the process, nine steps were set out that reflect the EU's shared values, including "free, fair and competitive elections," which Georgia needs to achieve before EU accession talks can begin and, ultimately, membership can be granted. Due to this, the scrutiny of the 27 EU member states, the United States of America, and others on Georgia's pre-election and election day environments will be higher than ever before. The elections provide an important opportunity for Georgian citizens to actively participate in determining the trajectory of their country, and for the Georgian government and all political stakeholders to demonstrate their commitment to the principles of inclusive, transparent and accountable elections, as well as their adherence to democratic values.

With eight months until parliamentary elections and six months until campaigns begin, there are positive signs, including broad public support for democracy, human rights and the rule of law²; sustained positive public impression of the police³ as well as a significant and maintained improvement in public perceptions of petty corruption⁴; efforts to improve transparency by resuming the publication of government decrees; and innovations to improve the efficiency of election day processes. At the same time, there are serious challenges to electoral integrity that need to be addressed, such as polarization, verbal attacks on civil society (including citizen observers), fears about the possible misuse of administrative resources for political advantage, and concerns around the implementation of new electoral technologies.

²See: NDI's survey research report "[Taking Georgians' pulse: Findings from August 2022 face to face survey](#)," 2022.

³See: IRI's survey research report "[Georgian Survey of Public Opinion | September – October 2023](#)," 2023.

⁴See: Over the past 20 years, [Transparency International's corruption ranking for Georgia](#) has improved from 127 of 133 countries in 2003 to 49 of 180 countries in 2023.

Georgia's elections benefit from an election management body, the Central Election Commission (CEC), that has demonstrated its technical expertise in managing voting and counting in past elections in accordance with the law. The adoption of new election day technologies has the potential to enhance efficiency of its processes. The CEC has used past elections to conduct limited pilots of new technologies and has set up demonstration polling stations where voters can practice filling in the new ballot papers. The CEC's ongoing engagement with stakeholders about the maximum number of registered voters per polling station is a positive example of an inclusive and consensus-based process consistent with norms. Other positive signs include the expressed intention of all political parties to conduct issue-based campaigns; the existence of highly respected civil society, including citizen observation organizations, such as GYLA, ISFED, PMMG and TI-Georgia; and the existence of a range of media representing a wide array of opinions.

Notwithstanding these positive elements, there are a series of negative dynamics that, if not addressed, threaten electoral integrity. There is widespread concern about the unprecedented level of personality-driven political polarization by political parties and their supporters and the resulting intolerance of alternative perspectives. In addition, among political actors, there is a need now for self reflection and the articulation of a vision about the future. As a result, there is a tendency to focus on past grievances rather than engaging meaningfully with citizens to respond effectively to current challenges. Particularly worrying are verbal attacks on civil society, including non-partisan citizen observer organizations. This extends to gendered attacks on women politicians and civic leaders which are extremely damaging as they can deter women's participation in political and public life, thereby undermining the representativeness of a democracy. While some efforts have been made to enhance the participation of ethnic minorities and people with disabilities in electoral processes, measures to date are not sufficient. Additional investments in ensuring that minority groups are better informed about all aspects of the elections, including the addition of technology and party political platforms, will be necessary. The equal and respectful treatment of LGBTQI+ populations is a sign of a healthy democracy. The legacy of past violence and discrimination against this and other vulnerable groups must be addressed and concrete steps by the government in the months prior to the election can and should be taken.

As with past elections, there is the belief that administrative resources may be used by the government of the day for electoral advantage - a fear heightened by the lack of communication and transparency around previous allegations submitted to the Prosecutor's Office and the lack of clarity related to the state security service's role in elections. The main broadcast media outlets remain highly partisan in their editorial approach and there is limited space for genuine cross party discussion with the notable exception of some smaller online outlets. While the CEC has demonstrated technical competence, public trust in the organization is undermined by a lack of political consensus over its composition and selection of commissioners. Georgians welcome the use of election day technology, but worry there is insufficient understanding of these technologies and fear unsubstantiated rumors about the secrecy of the vote. The 5 percent threshold for representation in parliament and changes prohibiting party blocs risk reducing pluralism and making the resulting parliament less representative of Georgian society.

There remains significant time ahead of the October 2024 parliamentary elections to build an enabling environment around elections that can ensure that they are a step forward on the Georgian democratic journey. The delegation proposes the following priority actions:

- To counter political polarization, all election stakeholders should publicly acknowledge the legitimacy of other actors, even those with divergent views, and proactively recognize that democratic elections inherently require respect for those with different opinions. At the same time, hostile rhetoric and attempts to discredit the work of citizen observers should cease.
- All election stakeholders, including security forces, should reject physical violence and verbal intimidation to ensure all Georgians can freely participate in the electoral process.
- Election stakeholders should publicly recognize the integral role that citizen observers play in a credible election process and that observation reports, including findings and recommendations, are offered with the intent of promoting electoral integrity.
- Political parties, government officials, and media should refrain from engaging in or amplifying hate speech against journalists or marginalized groups, especially the LGBTQI+ community, as well as refrain from misogynistic attacks on women politicians and civic activists.
- The Ministry of Internal Affairs should increase transparency about the role it plays in the pre-election period and on election day and address misconceptions about its role with the aim of bolstering confidence in the secrecy of the ballot.
- Public and private media should include parties across the political spectrum in their programs and all political parties should agree to appear on both like minded and divergent media as well as participate in candidate debates.
- The CEC should redouble its efforts to address any unsubstantiated rumors about the secrecy of the vote and work with all political parties and civil society to assure the public, including marginalized communities, that their vote is their secret through substantial voter education efforts.
- The CEC should consider, as has been the case in other countries, conducting a nationwide test of new technologies that mirrors conditions of election day in order to further enhance public confidence.
- The CEC should ensure the full participation of marginalized groups, especially ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities, in the elections by providing appropriate accommodations and voter education materials tailored to these groups' needs.
- The CEC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) should provide greater transparency on the process for determining the location of polling stations outside of Georgia and facilitate, to the degree possible, voting access for citizens abroad.

While the government has the responsibility for creating an enabling environment for elections and the CEC is the constitutionally mandated body for conducting elections, ultimately it is the responsibility of all election stakeholders, including all parties, civic organizations, and media, to show the country's

commitment to democratic norms and ensure that the electorate is well informed and engaged ahead of elections.

DELEGATION FINDINGS

Legal Framework

In recent years, Georgia has witnessed significant transformations in its electoral landscape, reflecting a broader transition from a presidential to a parliamentary system. These changes, while aimed at modernizing the electoral process, have also sparked debates regarding their impact on the country's governance structure and checks and balances. The 2024 parliamentary elections will be the first fully proportional elections, as mandated by 2017 constitutional amendments. Previously, the country had a mixed system where roughly half of the 150 members of parliament were elected from single-mandate districts elected on a first-past-the-post basis and the remaining seats were awarded proportionally based on national votes to a party list. In 2020, the country began to transition and reduced the number of single-mandate districts to 30. Some concerns were raised about the 5 percent threshold for a party to be represented in parliament as well as a change in the law to prohibit parties from contesting elections as coalitions or blocs. While the 5 percent threshold may have been intended to combat political fragmentation, the new rules which prohibit election blocs could undermine this objective. As a result, these changes risk reducing pluralism and making the parliament less representative of Georgian society. In 2017 constitutional amendments also eliminated the direct election of the president starting in 2024. This move shifted the focus of presidential power away from a popular mandate and further curtailed the responsibilities of the presidential office.

There have been a series of adjustments to the electoral framework, some of which came at the recommendation of the Venice Commission or the EU. Parliamentary elections are held on the last Saturday in October with the 2024 elections scheduled for October 26, 2024. The election administration operates through a three-tiered structure consisting of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and staff, the Supreme Election Commission of Autonomous Republic of Adjara (SEC) and staff, the District Election Commissions (DECs), and the Precinct Election Commissions (PECs). There are currently 73 DECs and 2,755 PECs for the 2024 elections. Currently, each election commission is made up of 17 members; out of the 17 members, 9 are appointed by political parties and 8 are non-partisan members.

Recent amendments to the electoral code, including those most recently passed in the third reading on February 20, 2024 while the delegation was in Georgia, are inconsistent with international recommendations from both the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)'s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Venice Commission, and could further reduce trust in the CEC. The composition and nomination process for the CEC has undergone notable changes. To ensure consensus in a polarized political environment, the April 19 Agreement recommended changes to the appointment process for CEC members to promote consensus, which would have required two-thirds support from Parliament to elect the CEC Chairperson and Members for five year terms. Due to insufficient support, the current Chair of the CEC was elected with a six month term in August 2021. Since this time, no nominated candidates have received the necessary two-thirds vote and, as a result based on the electoral code, Kalandarishvili has acted as the Chairman as the incumbent. Amendments to the electoral code shifted the authority to nominate CEC members from the President to the Speaker of Parliament, and shifted the threshold for confirmation several times. A series of amendments over the past

few years reduced the required quorum from a two-thirds majority, to then a simple majority, and finally to a three-fifths majority as of February 2024. Most critically, the recent amendments abolished the position of Deputy Head of the CEC, a position filled by the opposition. This, in combination with a higher threshold for entry into Parliament, reduces opportunities to build political consensus in decision-making and to increase public trust in the impartiality of the CEC.

In addition to electoral reforms, the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) in November 2022 marked a significant milestone in Georgia's anti-corruption efforts. Tasked with combating corruption, monitoring political party finances, asset declarations of public officials, and overseeing the implementation of anti-corruption policies, the ACB's creation aligns with recommendations from the European Commission. However, concerns regarding the bureau's independence have been raised, prompting calls for additional safeguards to ensure its effectiveness.⁵ Despite its power to oversee political financing and asset declarations, the ACB lacks investigatory powers and is reliant on publicly available information and information provided by the Security Services and the Prosecutor's Office.⁶

As Georgia prepares for the 2024 parliamentary elections, these developments underscore the evolving nature of its electoral framework and the ongoing imperative to safeguard democratic principles and institutional integrity.

Political Parties and Political Discourse

Georgian politics in recent years has suffered from mistrust, elite-level political polarization based on personality, and political vilification. This unwillingness to put aside personal differences to work jointly on responding constructively to current challenges inhibits political parties from working together to adequately address the needs and rights of Georgians. These elections provide an opportunity for all political parties to demonstrate that Georgia, despite recent challenges and rising political polarization, continues to make progress and is serious about its transparent, pluralist, and democratic path. All parties, but especially the ruling party, have a special responsibility when it comes to both the conduct of the election and the confidence and trust of the public in the process. Therefore, the constructive participation of parties is critical at this time.

As a result of personality-based politics and increasing polarization, there is a lack of attention among political decision-makers on the issues that Georgians care about most and an overall deficit in issue-based party platforms. Although all political parties that the delegation met expressed a desire to campaign on matters of most concern to the Georgian public and set out some areas where they will focus, this will require a concerted effort to break with the practice of past campaigns which have not tended to focus on issues of public concern. To date there has been little to no public debate on such issues among parties or among opposition parties. As a result, citizens are largely unable to identify a party that they believe represents their interests. According to NDI's November 2023 public opinion poll, 62 percent of citizens could not identify a party which they feel represents them.⁷ The range of political parties in Georgia is largely not reflective of true ideological or policy divisions among citizens. Although parties have expressed interest in coming together in order to be better responsive to citizens, there is a lack of political

⁵ See: The Venice Commission's "[Opinion on the Provisions of the Law on the Fight Against Corruptions Concerning The Anti-Corruption Bureau. Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 1337th Plenary Session](#), 15-16 December 2023.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See: NDI's survey research report "[Taking Georgians' pulse: Findings from October-November 2023 face to face survey](#)," 2023.

will to put aside individual power interests. NDI's observation mission will be monitoring the campaign period and hopes to see parties developing issue-based campaigns and abstain from unsubstantiated accusations and hyper-personalized attacks.

Election Administration:

Overview Assessment: The CEC is a highly professional and competent election management body that has, in past elections, demonstrated its technical expertise to conduct election day processes in a generally orderly fashion and in accordance with Georgian law. However, there is a lack of trust in the institution and its impartiality among critical stakeholders, including civil society, opposition parties, and media. Considering the introduction of new electoral technologies, including voter identification equipment, optical ballot scanners, and results transmission equipment, building public trust among the electorate is required.

Election Technology: Following legal changes adopted with cross-party support, the CEC introduced new election technology for the 2024 elections, including a voter identification system, optical ballot scanners, and electronic transfer of the preliminary results using tablets once the polls close. For the 2024 elections, the new technologies will be employed at polling stations with approximately 90 percent of registered voters (estimated as 75 percent of all polling stations). The CEC conducted a transparent procurement process to identify a company to provide the technology for the 2024 elections. Civil society and elections experts raised concerns that the bid requirements were tailored to the specifications of Smartmatic's technologies with the company being the only bidder. The CEC commissioned an external compliance audit of the use of new election technologies during the October 2023 by-elections and extraordinary by-election. The audit conducted by Pro V&V did not identify any serious concerns. However, there has not been an audit of technology unaffiliated with the CEC. Pilot initiatives to introduce these technologies first began during the 2018 and 2019 municipal (Sakrebulo) elections with additional pilots in 2021 municipal elections, 2022 and 2023 parliamentary by-elections, and an extraordinary mayoral election. A nationally representative stress test, with conditions similar to election day, has not been conducted; however, the CEC did pilot all three technologies simultaneously during the 2023 elections.

Precinct and District Electoral Commissions: Concerns were raised regarding the potential for political bias among District Electoral Commission (DEC) and Precinct Electoral Commission (PEC) professional members and the need for greater transparency and accountability of the selection process to enhance public confidence in the impartial conduct of elections.

Voter Trust: Interlocutors consistently raised the issue of mistrust among citizens and parties regarding vote secrecy. They referenced unsubstantiated rumors related to the use of election day technologies and the role of security agencies that could create distrust about vote secrecy among voters. Regardless of the veracity of the allegations, the negative impact on the integrity of the election is real and leads to distrust, discourages participation among the electorate, and stymies open political discourse. All stakeholders should have an interest in building long-term confidence in the election institutions and the democratic process in Georgia and continued voter education in this area is needed.

Frameworks for Inclusive Elections: Guaranteeing the full participation of marginalized communities, including ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, in elections is critical to demonstrating the inclusiveness of Georgian democracy. The CEC is translating documents into Armenian and Azerbaijani

languages, but it is not clear whether these measures are sufficient to ensure full participation in the elections. In addition, civil society reported that the CEC is ensuring that polling stations are accessible to people with disabilities; though there is a need for further coordination and collaboration between the CEC, relevant authorities, and CSOs representing people with disabilities in order to address remaining accessibility issues.

Inclusiveness

Civil society: Georgia has a strong and vibrant civil society. Persistent attempts to discredit civil society and civic leaders hinders their work as watchdogs, service providers, and advocates for citizens, especially during the electoral period. Efforts designed to silence critical voices are a reflection of a lack of tolerance for criticism and alternative views, and the delegation applauds the prudence of policy makers to remove consideration of the Foreign Agents Law in March 2023. A democratic election environment is only possible through the unhindered work of domestic civil society, and in particular, the ability of citizen observation groups to fulfill their monitoring role without private or public intimidation. Public criticism by political actors on nonpartisan citizen observation efforts, recognized by the United Nations as human rights defenders, leads to questions about the commitment of the Georgian Government to an open electoral environment.

Women: Of note, the European Union marked recommendation number nine of its original recommendations issued in June 2023 completed, citing Parliament’s adoption of a package of draft laws related to compliance with the Istanbul Convention, mandatory Gender Impact Assessment for all legislative acts and several amendments regulating the fight against violence against women, as well as the approval of the State Concept on Economic Empowerment of Women and the extension of gender quotas in Parliament to include elections in 2032. Despite this progress, women largely remain sidelined in politics, and especially within political leadership. The current legislation on the gender quota requires that one out of every four candidates on the party list should be a woman through the 2024 elections, and then increase to one in every three for the 2028 and 2032 elections. Legal changes dictate any departing woman MP is replaced by a woman, and a man is replaced by the next candidate in the list, and financial incentives were updated in 2020 for political parties that place one of every three candidates of a different gender. However, women still only hold roughly 20 percent of seats in parliament and Georgia ranks 124th on the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s (IPU) ranking of women in national parliaments, significantly impeding their ability to influence political decision-making.⁸ The gender quota provides a floor for women’s political representation; however, political parties have a duty to go beyond legal requirements to demonstrate their dedication to gender parity. Notably, many women representatives report that parties only followed the requirements of the law when forming the lists and only rarely were there exceptions where the first number on the party list was a woman or where there were more women on the electoral list than required by the law.⁹

Contributing to this issue, gendered attacks on women politicians and public figures, including civic leaders, inhibit women’s participation in political and public life, undermining the representativeness of Georgian democracy. According to research conducted by CRRC-Georgia in 2022, 54 percent of women in politics at the national and local levels have experienced some form of harassment or violence during

⁸ See: Inter-Parliamentary Union’s [Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments](#).

⁹ See: United Nations Development Program’s publication “[Mandatory Electoral Gender Quotas in Georgia](#),” 2022.

their tenure as an appointed official or during campaigns.¹⁰ Nearly all female MPs who were interviewed reported experiencing some form of violence or harassment. The most widespread forms of violence against women in politics are psychological violence (37 percent), violence in social networks (32 percent), and economic violence including denying of funds/resources or destroying property (25 percent).

LGBTQI+ Community: Escalating anti-rights rhetoric in Georgia presents an immense challenge for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+)¹¹ community and could threaten their ability to fully participate in the pre-election period due to fear of physical violence and inability to freely assemble without intimidation. This trend poses a particular risk of further marginalizing the community. Of particular concern is the Ministry of Internal Affairs' (MIA) failure to protect LGBTQI+ community members and media representatives during the Pride March events in 2021. Additionally, the failure of assurance of freedom of assembly and expression for the LGBTQI+ community at the enclosed space for the Pride Fest in 2023 has compounded challenges faced by community members in their daily lives and their fundamental right to political participation. Therefore, the treatment of the LGBTQI+ community is a litmus test of the Georgian Government's commitment to human rights enshrined in the Georgian constitution and basic fundamental freedoms during this election period.

Ethnic Minorities: Ethnic minorities, including Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, are sidelined in politics. Although 13 percent of Georgia's population, ethnic minorities comprise only 4 percent of Parliament (six MPs). In addition, the elimination of majoritarian candidates as a result of the shift to a fully proportional system may impact the representation of ethnic minority populations as majoritarian districts were densely populated by ethnic minorities. Going forward, political parties may lack incentives to include ethnic minority candidates on their party lists, especially in a high position. Language barriers are a significant challenge to these communities' full inclusion and participation during the pre-election period. The absence of widespread multilingual news results in their reliance on news from Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, causing a dearth of information and rendering them vulnerable to malign influence.

Youth: Youth are particularly disillusioned with the state of Georgian politics. In a recent survey conducted by NDI in October-November 2023, only 20 percent of young people aged 18-34 said there is at least one party that somewhat represents their interests. Additionally, only 9 percent of young people evaluated the Parliament's performance as good, while 37 percent assessed it as bad. As youth increasingly feel that they lack viable and representative political options, their participation in elections is likely to decrease.

Persons with Disabilities: CSOs report that voting booths themselves have been adapted for people with disabilities by the CEC. However, widespread countrywide infrastructural issues, such as ensuring the full accessibility of public buildings and road infrastructures, create challenges for people with disabilities (PWDs) to vote at precincts and require coordination and collaboration among the CEC, relevant authorities, and the PWD community themselves. The CEC provides sign language translation and has

¹⁰ See: United Nations Joint Programme "For Gender Equality in Georgia" report "[Violence Against Women in Politics in Georgia](#)," 2022.

¹¹ Globally, there is no consensus on the acronym to use when referring to LGBTQI+ communities. While NDI uses "LGBTQI+," others may prefer different terminology that reflects their unique identities. As these terms are fluid, culturally specific, and constantly evolving, NDI would ensure communication with local partners reflects the local context and preferences of grant recipients.

reported plans to share documents in simplified language. However, political parties often fail to provide sign language translation or documents in simplified language, limiting the ability of persons with disabilities from both understanding discussions and sharing their thoughts as potential voters.

Abuse of State Resources

As with past elections, there is some concern that state administrative resources may be used by the government for their electoral advantage. In NDI’s poll ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections, 30 percent of citizens named bribing of voters and vote buying as the largest barrier for free and fair elections – with twice as many citizens naming this challenge compared to the second most frequent issue, violations during voting procedures.¹² Previous election observation missions carried out by various local and international organizations, including NDI, have consistently raised concerns about the line being blurred between the ruling party and the government. The unwillingness of the Georgian Government to communicate transparently about allegations of electoral fraud submitted to the Prosecutor’s Office in September 2022 by CSOs based on documents from the Former Deputy Head of the State Security Services has prompted questions from the Georgian public, political parties, and other stakeholders about whether administrative resources are being used by the government for electoral gain.

Information Environment

Media in Georgia is pluralistic but highly partisan, resulting in a lack of balanced coverage of top issues. Emotional appeals take precedence over fact-based reporting. According to the Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE), the assessment of Georgia’s information environment decreased by six points from 2020 to 2023, largely due to the growing presence of mal-information/hate speech, domestic and foreign harmful information, and severe financial hardships for independent and critical media.¹³ Freedom House states that “media freedom is undermined by intimidation and pressure against journalists.”¹⁴ As is true globally, the business model for media perpetuates polarization as a lack of independent funding sources means that media outlets have become captured by political interests who fund their operations. As a result, political actors and media can have the power to exacerbate toxic political discourse and ethno-nationalist rhetoric. This has a disproportionate negative effect on marginalized groups, including the LGBTQI+ community and ethnic and religious minorities, who are frequently the targets of this discourse. It is critical that political candidates appear on a wide array of channels, both aligned with the ruling party and opposition, in order to present meaningful debates and opportunities for voters to understand candidate positions on issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The actions of electoral stakeholders to prepare for the 2024 elections are critical to promote more inclusive, transparent, and accountable elections. A number of long-standing recommendations from both citizen observer organizations and the international community, including those of NDI, have not been addressed to date and should be considered seriously. This report highlights actional recommendations that can be addressed in the next 8 months ahead of the upcoming election. Longer-term systemic recommendations will be made in NDI’s final observer report following the conclusion of the 2024 election cycle.

¹² See: NDI’s survey research report “[Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of August 2020 telephone survey](#),” 2020.

¹³ See: IREX’s “[Vibrant Information Barometer 2023: Georgia](#),” 2023.

¹⁴ See: Freedom House’s “[Georgia: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report](#),” 2023.

On Political Parties and Political Discourse

- *Recommendation to all electoral stakeholders:* To counter political polarization, all election stakeholders should publicly acknowledge the legitimacy of other actors, even those with divergent views and proactively recognize that democratic elections inherently require respect for those with different opinions.
- *Recommendation to political parties:* Parties should consult with public and relevant civil society groups to develop issue-based platforms. They should seek to share their vision with the public as early as possible during the election period to support issue focused campaign activity, and should clearly articulate what they would hope to accomplish over the next four years.
- *Recommendation to political parties:* Participate in issue-based debates and discussions across the country on a range of media outlets.
- *Recommendation to media:* Establish new and inclusive approaches to facilitate meaningful policy debate among political parties with the overall aim of ensuring citizens are well informed of the different positions when casting their vote.

On Inclusiveness

Recommendations related to the role of civil society in elections

- *Recommendation to all electoral stakeholders:* Publicly recognize the integral role that citizen observers play in a credible election process and that observation reports, including findings and recommendations, are offered with the intent of promoting electoral integrity. At the same time, hostile rhetoric and attempts to discredit the work of citizen observers should cease.
- *Recommendation to the Government:* Engage in good faith with civil society organizations through a multitude of inclusive platforms. Consider constructive criticism and policy suggestions in order to improve public confidence in the integrity of the elections.
- *Recommendation to civil society:* Engage in good faith with all stakeholders through a multitude of inclusive platforms. Provide constructive criticism and policy suggestions in order to improve public confidence in the integrity of the elections.
- *Recommendation to the international community:* Continue to be consistent and public in the assertion that support for all independent civil society will not cease, and that its commitment is driven by support for the Georgian people's ambitions for a more democratic, prosperous, and accountable system.

Recommendations related to the role of women in elections

- *Recommendation to political parties:* Recruit, train, support, and provide equitable resources to a greater number of women for the parliamentary and subsequent elections and further develop party infrastructure to support women and integrate issues of particular concern to women into party policy.
- *Recommendation to political parties:* Develop more transparent and democratic candidate selection processes; improve the position of women on the party lists; and support women in leadership positions once in office.
- *Recommendation to political parties:* Dedicate funding received for exceeding the quota to initiatives that promote gender mainstreaming and empower women within their organizations. This is required by law but often falls short in practice.

Recommendations related to the role of marginalized groups in elections, including the LGBTQI+ Community, Ethnic Minorities, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities

- *Recommendation to all:* Election stakeholders, including security forces, should reject physical violence and verbal intimidation to ensure all Georgians can freely participate in the electoral process.
- *Recommendation to the CEC:* Ensure the full participation of marginalized groups, especially ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities, in the elections by providing appropriate accommodations and voter education materials tailored to these groups' needs.
- *Recommendation to the Ministry of Internal Affairs:* Build trust and provide sufficient protection to ensure all Georgians can exercise basic rights, including freedom of assembly, provide specific hate crime training for law enforcement and provide training to improve the recording of hate crimes in the pre-election period in order to build trust. Given the recent history of violence for particular groups, strong and proactive measures are required to provide additional reassurance.
- *Recommendation to political parties:* Recruit, train, support, and provide equitable campaign resources to a greater number of ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups for the parliamentary and subsequent elections.

On Election Administration

- *Recommendation to the CEC:* Intensify efforts to address any unsubstantiated rumors about the secrecy of the vote and work with all political parties and civil society to assure the public, including marginalized communities, that their vote is their secret through substantial voter education efforts.
- *Recommendation to the Ministry of Internal Affairs:* Increase transparency about the role it plays in the pre-election period and on election day and address misconceptions about its role with the aim of bolstering confidence in the secrecy of the ballot.
- *Recommendation to the CEC:* Consider, as has been the case in other countries, conducting a nationwide test of new technologies that mirrors conditions of election day in order to further enhance public confidence.
- *Recommendation to the CEC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:* Provide greater transparency on the process for determining the location of polling stations outside of Georgia and facilitate, to the degree possible, voting access for citizens abroad.
- *Recommendation to the CEC:* Continue and expand voter information activities for the Georgian public, especially marginalized groups, on the new technologies and electoral process. Ensure that the success of such activities are measured throughout the pre-election period to ensure that efforts are sufficient.
- *Recommendation for the media:* Provide accurate and timely information to citizens about the changes to the electoral process, including but not limited to the introduction of technology and the technical aspects of the election process.
- *Recommendation to the CEC:* Continue to assess the adequacy of the capacity of the polling stations to manage the number of registered voters, following the reduction in the total number of precincts.
- *Recommendation to the CEC:* Continue and expand training for all precinct and district commission members in coordination with civil society, especially in rural areas and ethnic minority communities, to ensure a firm understanding of the use of new technologies and related processes.

- *Recommendation to the CEC:* Enhance transparency and accountability regarding selection of precinct and district commission members to build trust and encourage members to exercise their duties in a nonpartisan manner.

On Abuse of State Resources

- *Recommendation to the Prosecutor's Office:* Follow up on cases involving vote buying or intimidation in a timely manner in advance of the elections.
- *Recommendation to Government leaders:* Undertake a visible, concerted effort to ensure that there is a clear separation between the party and the state and that public officials or administrative resources are not employed for campaign purposes. Government leadership should clearly communicate to all civil servants and the public that abuse of administrative resources will not be tolerated, and that violators will face prosecution.

On Information Environment

- *Recommendation to all electoral stakeholders:* Refrain from engaging in or amplifying hate speech against journalists or marginalized groups, especially the LGBTQI+ community, as well as refrain from misogynistic attacks on women politicians and civic activists.
- *Recommendation to media:* Both public and private media should include political parties across the political spectrum in their programs, and all political parties should agree to appear on both like-minded and divergent media as well as participate in candidate debates.
- *Recommendation to the Government:* Lead on building an inclusive society and publicly state that a democracy affirms the right of all persons to exercise their fundamental freedoms and constitutional rights.
- *Recommendation to media:* Divide editorial and news segments.

NDI

NDI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. NDI has observed more than 200 elections in every region in the world, including elections in Georgia since 1992.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1: List of Organizations and Entities that Met with the Delegation

Georgian Central Election Commission (CEC)

President of Georgia

Prime Minister of Georgia

Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA)

Anti-Corruption Bureau

Political parties and platforms: Gream Dream, United National Movement, Lelo - Partnership for Georgia, Euro-optimists, Girchi, Reforms Group, Citizens, For Georgia, For Justice, Democratic Movement-United Georgia, European Georgia.

Civil society: International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED); Georgia Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA); Transparency International (TI) - Georgia; Public Movement Multinational Georgia (PMMG); Association Anika; Georgia's Reforms Associates; Media Development Foundation; Social Justice Center; Tbilisi Pride; Women's Information Center

Kvinna till Kvinna

Media: Alliance of Regional Broadcasters, Georgian Public Broadcaster, Civil.ge, Formula TV, TV Imedi, Interpressnews (IPN), Mtavari Arkhi TV, Netgazeti, On.ge, TV Pirveli, Radio Liberty - Tbilisi Bureau, Rustavi 2, Tabula Media.

Representatives from the Diplomatic Community: the United States, Sweden, Great Britain, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, United Nations, European Union, Council of Europe, NATO.

International Republican Institute (IRI)

International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)