



**TECHNICAL ELECTION
ASSESSMENT MISSION:
GEORGIA 2020 NATIONAL
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS**



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*Technical Election Assessment Mission:
Georgia 2020 National Parliamentary elections*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted a Technical Election Assessment Mission (TEAM) to Georgia's 2020 national parliamentary elections. The elections followed the passage of significant constitutional and Election Code reforms that transpired beginning in June of 2019 and, after several rounds of inclusive negotiations, resulted in a modification of Georgia's mixed electoral system and a reduction in the national proportional threshold from 5 percent to 1 percent to achieve parliamentary representation. The lowered threshold allowed the Georgian electorate to pursue viable third-party options and provided impetus for new parties to compete. It also presented an opportunity for Georgia to test new reforms intended to increase political competition and gender diversity in parliament after decades of single-party domination. The constitutional reforms were perceived as a step forward for Georgia, particularly as they were later coupled with electoral amendments that partially incorporated recommendations from observers following the 2018 presidential election. The lead up to the 2020 election marked commendable steps toward building a more diverse and pluralistic government, increasing transparency in campaign spending disclosures, and strengthening enforcement of the Election Code.

The pre-election period was by-and-large peaceful and politically competitive, with few incidents of violence. Political parties and candidates were able to organize and campaign freely and citizens had access to a variety of political news media and information. However, an insufficient number of substantive candidate debates and a highly polarized media environment meant election content centered on personalities and rhetoric rather than policies and citizen concerns.

The Central Election Commission was proactive in its voter education and demonstrated to the international community its desire to conduct

elections and ensure franchise for eligible voters amidst a rare global pandemic. For the most part, the election commission successfully publicized citizens' options for voting modalities during the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) health crisis. These steps were unprecedented and commendable. However, they were overshadowed by public mistrust of lower-level election commissions that were perceived as partisan extensions of the ruling government.

On October 31, Georgians showed their enthusiasm for democracy by going to the polls despite the potential exposure to COVID-19. The Central Election Commission reported 56.1 percent turnout, a 5-percent increase from 2016. The newly reduced threshold resulted in nine parties acquiring the requisite vote share to achieve parliamentary representation, though the reduction of single-member districts from 73 to 30 was expected, the subsequent delimitation of constituency boundaries fell short of international standards for equal suffrage.

Credible observer groups and numerous interlocutors with whom IRI met throughout the assessment period reported irregularities, including allegations of coercion and intimidation of civil servants, misuse of state administrative resources, and interference of party observer representatives among other anomalies. Weaknesses were also identified in the management, verification, and certification of results. Analysis of precinct level results tabulation and verification systems and summary protocol documents identified susceptibility to manipulation. In addition, interlocutors and stakeholders with whom IRI met reported lack of trust in enforcement of the Election Code due to insufficient remedies for election-related complaints, also undermining trust in the judiciary more broadly.

The reforms enacted prior to the 2020 election were a first step to creating a more free, equal, and representative electoral playing field that, if effectively enforced, could have the potential to positively impact Georgia's democratic trajectory. The newly formed Government of Georgia must work in earnest to address shortcomings identified by observers and implement recommendations to improve future electoral processes. By prioritizing recommendations, enacting further reforms to address irregularities, and implementing new reforms according to the spirit and intent of the law, public trust and confidence in electoral outcomes can be restored.

BACKGROUND

Georgia gained its independence in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the onset of civil war and the subsequent loss of territories resulted in a political system that could only be stabilized through widespread corruption and crime. In 2003, the Rose Revolution sought to end this era, ushering in a period of significant reform. From 2003 to 2012, under the leadership of former President Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement (UNM) party, Georgia made impressive strides toward consolidating its democratic aspirations by reducing corruption, fostering a free and diverse media and cultivating a culture of relative political pluralism. However, their legacy was affected by allegations of abuses of power, disproportionate uses of law enforcement and censorship. In 2012, they were succeeded as the party of power by the Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia (GD) coalition. Since then, GD has dominated Georgia's political space, consolidating power and representation by winning a constitutional majority in the 2016 Parliamentary Elections, and majorities in 62 out of 64 municipalities in the 2017 Municipal Elections. However, despite GD's strong majority and domination in the political space, UNM has continued operating as the primary opposition

This report is informed by six long-term analysts (LTAs) deployed to Tbilisi from September to November 2020 who engaged with government authorities, political parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), election-commission officials and other stakeholders to assess the process of election administration, the campaign environment, results management, media space, inclusion and preparedness for holding elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. IRI stands with the people of Georgia on their journey to democratic consolidation and hopes that the findings and recommendations presented in this report contribute positively to improving electoral integrity in the short- and long-term.

party, a new and positive development in Georgia for defeated ruling parties.

Historically, Georgia's mixed-majoritarian electoral system has tended to favor the party that wins the highest number of seats but not necessarily the most overall votes cast. Over time, this reality has deepened divisions between the ruling and opposition parties and their allies and inhibited new and emerging parties from establishing themselves as viable alternatives. In recent years, political discourse – particularly the bitter rivalry between GD and UNM – has been characterized by vitriolic rhetoric rather than substantive policy debate, with politicians preferring to paint their political opponents as “pro-Russia” since, increasingly, the threat of foreign malign influence in Georgia has become reality. Taking Georgia's geopolitical history into account, specifically the 2008 Russian invasion and annexation of the Tskhinvali Region and the years of creeping borderization by Russia, the inability to unite against a common aggressor has been particularly corrosive to the political culture. Furthermore, mistrust of the Central Election Commission, especially partisan appointments within lower-level election bodies has undermined public confidence in institutions and political actors.

While the legal framework provides for fundamental freedoms and democratic elections, Georgia struggles to effectively implement and enforce some its laws guiding free and fair elections. Insufficient application of the law has sparked public criticism that enforcement of some criminal laws, for example, are selectively applied. Positively, it is noteworthy that Georgia's media environment is free and diverse. However, both public and

private media are widely perceived as conduits of the two main political forces. As such, impartial news content remains a huge challenge. Moreover, disinformation and agitation from internal and external malign actors—persistently undermines attempts at cultivating political cohesion.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Adopted in 1995, Georgia's constitution guarantees citizens a wide array of electoral and political rights. Elections are guided by the Election Code of Georgia and the Law on Political Associations of Citizens of Georgia. Georgia's electoral system is a mixed closed-party list and majoritarian system. On June 29, 2020, following a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) among the major political parties, legislative amendments were adopted to the constitution which provided the legal basis for an enhanced electoral system. Substantive modifications to promote a more inclusive and diverse parliament included: a shift from the previous system of 77 elected proportionally and 73 single-member constituencies to a system of 120 elected proportionally and 30 elected in single-member constituencies (majoritarian); a reduction of the requisite national proportional threshold from 5 percent to 1 percent; and a minimum requirement of 40 percent of seats of the proportional list to form a single party majority. In the single-member, majoritarian constituencies contestants may be elected by an absolute majority of valid votes cast. In instances where no candidate in a constituency received the requisite valid votes, a runoff will be held between the two top winning candidates.

The new constituencies boundaries for the 30 majoritarian constituencies were detailed in the Law on the Change to the Constitution of Georgia adopted in June and repeated in the Election

Code. The total number of voters in Georgia as of September 2020, was 3,511,338, making the average number of votes per constituency 117,044. The deviation from the average size of SMDs should not exceed 15 percent with some exceptions for ethnic minorities and geographical factors. The district with the smallest number of voters is SMD 19 (Ambrolauri, Oni, Tsageri, Lentekhi and Mestia municipalities), which has 44,110 registered voters. The district with the largest number of voters is SMD 23 (Kutaisi municipality), with 155,236 voters. The difference in the number of voters between these two SMDs is 111,126. More than half of constituencies (18 out of 30) deviate more than 15 percent from the average size, and five constituencies deviate more than 30 percent. The deviation and significant unequal distribution of voters in 2020 ran contrary to the principle of equal suffrage.

Additional legislative reforms passed in 2020 marked a degree of progress toward improving the overall electoral environment. However, uneven implementation of some reforms in particular, dispute resolution mechanisms, election of subnational election officials, and tighter investigation and enforcement for campaign finance violations were lost opportunities for additional advancement. Frequently, interlocutors with whom the TEAM met frequently raised concerns about the independence of the judiciary;

inadequate investigations and expedition of cases of politically motivated violence and intimidation; and insufficient resolution (or more frequently no resolution at all) for complaints. To ensure election reforms are implemented according to the spirit of the law and that Georgian citizens can fully exercise their constitutional rights, Georgia's new

government should prioritize continual alignment of its constitution and legal frameworks with international norms for democratic elections and in consultation with electoral stakeholders and civil society.

PRE-ELECTION PERIOD

Election Administration

The election management structures, responsible for managing the technical aspects of election administration including complaints resolution and candidate registration were the Central Election Commission (CEC), 73 District Election Commissions (DEC) and 3,849 Precinct Election Commissions (PEC).¹

Voter registration was passive and continuous. The CEC was responsible for creation of a unified list of voters based on data received from the Public Service Development Agency (within the Ministry of Justice) and various other ministries and state institutions. According to the CEC, the voter roll consisted of 3,511 853 voters. Notably, the official number of registered voters is much higher than the voting age population. Notwithstanding, most interlocutors with whom the TEAM met did not express concerns about the voter list or registration process.

Pre-election processes were transparent, well administered and, for the most part, according to prescribed law. The CEC and DECs held regular sessions with the presence of party representatives and accredited observers. Adopted decisions and session minutes were promptly published

on its website. The same was true of DECs for which a separate repository of decisions was available online. The publishing of minutes was well-administered and contributed to the overall transparency of the process.

The CEC Training Centre developed and conducted a phased, comprehensive training program for DEC and PEC members as well as other stakeholders. Various professional guidelines, explanatory manuals and educational materials were prepared by the Centre, including in minority languages.² Training materials in Georgian, Azeri and Armenian were disseminated and trainings were held online and in person. Apart from reports that social distancing was not always practiced for in-person activities, trainings were substantive and professional in their execution.

To inform citizens ahead of Election Day, the CEC initiated a robust voter education initiative including outdoor advertising, social media and direct engagement with voters. Voter education videos were also released on social media in Georgian, Azeri and Armenian, and in sign language. Topics included checking registration data and helping voters locate which PECs were adapted for wheelchair users, as well as modalities for overseas voting and voting during COVID-19.

¹ 3657 regular PECs; 127 special PECs for those in medical facilities and in isolation (both quarantined and self-isolated); 11 special PECs in penitentiary and mental health institutions; 54 PECs established abroad in 38 countries. In 2 PECs located abroad, voting did not take place. Thus, there was not a summary protocol for those PECs. The CEC results calculation indicates their results were based on protocols from 3846+1 annulled precinct.

² Guidelines approved by the CEC decree were detailed, binding documents explaining step by step practical aspects of using the Election Code provisions with reference to the concerned articles. This included for example guidelines for DEC member, PEC member, guidelines for polling day procedures, for PEC Chairperson, manual on using administrative resources, on imposing disciplinary measures on PEC members, on election disputes.

<https://cesko.ge/eng/list/show/120907-2020-tslis-31-oqtombris-archevnebisvis-shemushavebuli-sainformatsio-sastsavlo-masalebi>
<https://cesko.ge/eng/static/3448/sastsavlo/sainformatsio-masalebi>

Despite these achievements, many civil society organizations and political parties with whom the TEAM met expressed doubts about the CEC's neutrality and independence. This sentiment was echoed in a June-July 2020 IRI survey that found that half of Georgians surveyed (50 percent) have an "unfavorable" opinion of CEC's work while 43 percent had a "favorable" opinion.

A main driver of criticism regarding election administration was the process by which district and precinct election commissions (DEC/PEC) were formed. Half of the 12 member commissions are appointed by political parties which establish a parliamentary faction, proportionate to parliamentary representation. This is a relatively new rule that was adopted by the ruling majority in July 2017. This new rule assured that the ruling party had three appointees in each commission on each level of election administration, while UNM, EG and APG party each had one appointee. Further, six members were elected by the highest-ranking member in the hierarchy commission from among individual candidatures submitted in open competition in a procedure widely criticized by civil society and opposition parties. The shortage of candidates in many cases made the DEC/PEC appointments merely a pro forma exercise.

In its first session the PEC elects its executive members. According to CEC data, one thousand, four hundred and eighty-three (1,483) GD party appointees were elected to executive posts in PECs while the combined total of executive posts (heads, deputies and secretaries) elected from among the appointees of all opposition parties were just 13.³ International and domestic observer communities recommended in previous election reports that the government of Georgia revamp the election and appointment process for DEC/PEC members; however, this was not addressed in the 2020

reforms, and remains a persistent impediment to enhanced electoral integrity in Georgia.⁴

COVID-19

Georgia was one of the first countries to address the challenge of conducting elections during a global pandemic. To ensure citizens could exercise their constitutional rights in a safe environment, the CEC established a special multisector working group to determine sanitation procedures including the provision of personal protective equipment for poll workers, new procedures to control the flow of voters into polling stations, organization of voting in penitentiary institutions and voting procedures for the infected and quarantined.

In October, COVID-19 working group meetings took place against a backdrop of drastically rising COVID-19 infections. On October 19, CEC adopted a long-awaited decree determining that voting procedures for those hospitalized, quarantined or officially registered as being in "self-isolation" would be conducted exclusively through mobile ballot-box voting administered through designated "special groups" with the functions of a precinct commission.

However, late adoption of the October 19 decree resulted in a challenge to recruit 762 members of 127 "special groups" in three days. This was particularly difficult in Batumi and Kobuleti districts, where COVID-19 cases surged a few weeks prior to Election Day.⁵ The late adoption of the decree meant self-isolated voters had very little time to call the CEC hotline to be added to the "special group" registry prior to Election Day. The CEC extended the deadline twice but verifying whether citizens attempting to register for this service were really in self-isolation was often problematic. Still, the CEC's proactivity during the pandemic to ensure the right

³ See the CEC official data available here: <https://cesko.ge/eng/list/show/120718-informatsia-saubno-saarchevno-komisiebis-pirveli-skhdomebisa-datavmdjdomare/moadgile/mdivnis-archevis-protsebis-shesakheb-statistika-2-oqtomberis-mdgomareobit>

⁴ Certain mitigative measures were adopted and effectively implemented by DEC members and the CEC. Namely: a person may be elected as a PEC member provided that for his/her votes at least three out of five DEC members elected by the CEC for a term of five years; prohibition for DEC member to participate in the election procedure if he/she is a family member of a candidate; inadmissibility to elect a person as a member of the PEC, who was appointed as a member of any level election commission by a political party in the last general elections. See Election Code article 24(2).

⁵ On October 22, the CEC was forced to announce a new competition to fill in 145 vacancies. In Batumi in the case of 13 special groups there was no single candidature.

of all registered citizens to vote, irrespective of their health status, was commendable.

Campaign Finance

The Organic Law of Georgia on Political Association of Citizens (LGPAC), the Election Code, and the Law on State Audit form the legal basis for the funding of political party activities. Electoral subjects may receive funding from both private donors and public (state) funding. A July 2020 revision to the LGPAC included new provisions to increase transparency in political financing as well as stronger regulations for financing, including imposing sanctions for offenders of the law. The changes also included stricter limits on campaign spending, while donations from foreign, public-funded, religious, and anonymous sources remain prohibited.

The State Audit Office (SAO) — the body responsible for regulating campaign finance — has authority to impose sanctions after a court validation for violation of regulations guiding political party donations and shall prepare reports for the Prosecutor’s Office (PO) on criminal investigation of party finance violations such as vote buying.¹⁸ The SAO also publishes an extensive list of the sources of donations to political parties. In 2020, 19 political parties were “qualified electoral subjects” eligible for state funding, including four previous parliamentary parties⁶. The GD party’s donation declarations were significantly higher than those of all the opposition parties combined (10,355,212) though Lelo for Georgia received the highest donations of 2,599,290 GEL among all the opposition political parties.

While there were allegations that strong linkages exist between the ruling party and persons at business entities awarded large state tenders, the SAO did not have the capacity to fully investigate the allegations nor analyze the financial activities

between the ruling party and businesses. Following the release of a private dossier in August 2020, it was widely reported that the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) allegedly received funding from sources connected to Russian intelligence, as well as that APG received funds from Moscow-based POLITSECRETS, though these reports were never confirmed by Georgian authorities⁷. As a result, some opposition parties appealed to the CEC to revoke APG’s registration as a qualified electoral subject and urged the Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia to open an investigation into APG for accepting funding from foreign entities. No punitive action was taken.

In the pre-election period, the SAO filed eight protocols of administrative offense and imposed sanctions against some offenders of campaign finance laws (five remarks, two warnings and one fine). Although engagement between the SAO and civil society is generally constructive, the office is persistently under-resourced, typically has fewer than 15 full-time employees (with some seconded from other agencies) and struggles to effectively fulfill its investigative role including direct and indirect campaign financing (e.g., alleged illegal donations of state administrative resources or online media expenditures). Further, the SAO must obtain court permission to access the bank statements of political parties and donors, which has the potential to impede its auditing process. Inadequate resources and the imprecise legal agency of SAO to enforce campaign finance regulations resulted in inadequate investigations and, ultimately, insufficient enforcement of the law.

⁶ “Electoral subject” refers to a political party, initiative group of voters, or a candidate for public office which has been officially recognized and approved by either the Central Election Commission or the Chairperson of the relevant electoral commission to be included on the list of possible candidates or parties.”

⁷ Neal, Will. “NGO Probe Finds Russia ‘Directly Influencing’ Georgian Politics.” Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 1 Sept. 2020, occrp.org/en/daily/13042-ngo-probe-finds-russia-directly-influencing-georgian-politics.

Campaign Environment

The official campaign period began on September 1. Parties were required to register with the CEC as “electoral subjects” and submit party lists by October 1. New reforms that affected political activity included reducing the requisite number of signatures required to register, criminalizing voter coercion and intimidation, introducing provisions to curtail misuse of state resources as well as enactment of a mandatory gender quota whereby every fourth candidate on party list must be of the opposite gender. Fifty electoral subjects registered for the proportional contest, 48 political parties and two blocs.

According to the CEC, 68 parties registered, five withdrew and 19 were rejected. Four-hundred and ninety-two candidates ran for majoritarian seats of whom 107 were women (21.75 percent). Overall, the political space was competitive, and contestants were able to campaign freely. Though campaign rallies were less prevalent than in 2016 due to heightened concerns over COVID-19, different forms of election campaigning such as door-to-door canvassing, community meetings, traditional media coverage (TV shows, debates and paid and earned political advertisements) and social media outreach continued.

Populist political party messaging and negative social media campaigning undermined issue-focused campaign efforts, though in-person community-outreach events held by political parties tended to be more citizen-centered. Social media presence varied from party to party, primarily emphasizing top priorities. However, negative social media campaigning through fake accounts and pages designed to discredit opposing contestants was widely present in the information space.

Throughout October, televised debates took place on Georgia Public Broadcasting (GPB) network in which, for the most part, candidates focused on policy issues. Though many parties participated, some parties refused to debate their political opponents on other broadcast television stations

that they perceived to be operated by opposition-aligned entities. The lack of structured debates among all contestants, detracted from issue-based dialogue, undermined voters’ ability to make informed decisions, and was a missed opportunity for political party candidates to communicate their policy positions to voters.

Though the abuse of state resources is a criminal offense under Article 332 of the Criminal Code, the TEAM received reports of some civil servants abusing state administrative resources including local government workers actively campaigning or appearing at campaign events during official working hours; threats to withhold social services from opposition supporters; and intimidation from local security services. There were also reports of assaults on campaign activists, destruction of campaign property, alleged vote buying, and other provocations such as the recruitment of so-called “athletes” to intimidate voters.

In September, 40 political parties signed a Political Party Code of Conduct. There were few reports of serious electoral violence. However, the number of reported incidents increased closer to Election Day. The eruption of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops exacerbated tensions in the densely populated ethnic minority regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli in Georgia.

In these regions, few political parties maintained regional offices or made their campaign materials available in ethnic languages, which reduced their visibility and accessibility to the local electorate. This was especially evident in the remote Kist community in Pankisi region, where few political parties endeavored to go. Although civil society groups reported that the campaign environment in Samtskhe-Javakheti was consequently calmer than in previous years, in the two weeks prior to election day, multiple incidents involving assault, threats and damage to property were reported in Kvemo Kartli.

There were also reports of hate speech targeting ethnic Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia, an assault

involving a journalist, and alleged excessive use of force by police.¹⁶ The CEC itself was also the target of intimidation allegedly perpetrated by opposition agitators who hung posters with messages calling for the arrest of the CEC chairwoman. Another widely publicized incident occurred in Marneuli, where a fight broke out between representatives of UNM and the GD party. Such moments of hate speech, intimidation, and inter-party hostilities contributed to a tense political atmosphere in the days before Election Day.

The Interagency Commission for Free and Fair Elections (IACFFE), chaired by the Ministry of Justice, intended to enhance coordination among and between governmental agencies and political parties failed to attain the trust of all political parties as a credible coordination mechanism. Though some political parties attended IACFFE meetings, it was boycotted by nearly all opposition parties who alleged that IACFFE failed to effectively advise public officials to prevent and respond to election violations, and that IACFFE acted in the ruling party's interests, rather than serve as an impartial mechanism to facilitate effective resolution of complaints.

Inclusion

Georgia's ethnic minority groups make up approximately 13 percent of the population, of which 6.3 percent are Azerbaijani and 4.55 percent are Armenian. The majority of Azerbaijanis and Armenians reside in the Marneuli/Gardabani and Akhalkalaki/Ninotsminda electoral districts, respectively. Their communities often face numerous challenges to active political engagement including, but not limited to, language barriers, lack of education and economic marginalization. During the pre-election period, the eruption of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops contributed to a tense atmosphere in the densely populated ethnic minority regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli and may have further marginalized some groups from fully participating in the electoral process both as voters and as candidates.

In the parliamentary election, a total of 17 ethnic majoritarian candidates ran in only two ethnic minority constituencies, three of whom were women. As a result of recent electoral reforms that reduced the number of single-mandate majoritarian seats, races in ethnic minority regions were more open and competitive than in 2016. Several political parties nominated candidates belonging to ethnic minority groups on their party lists as well; and despite minority groups historically supporting the ruling party in power, youth in minority regions increasingly sought avenues to assert their political agency and participate.

For its part, the CEC took notable steps to ensure minorities had access to information including creating voter-education materials and multilingual ballots in Azerbaijani, Georgian and Armenian languages. To make voting and information more accessible for persons with disabilities, the CEC also translated informational videos into sign language; conducted an online course for PEC and DEC members on how to use frames for the visually impaired; adopted temporary procedures for the participation of voters using wheelchairs; and developed an interactive map of the 1,126 (approximately 29%) polling stations accessible to wheelchair users.

Tbilisi Pride, a civic movement that opposes homo/transphobia in Georgia and promotes LGBTQI issues (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex), reported that the campaign period was relatively free of homophobic rhetoric, though few political parties have adopted LGBTQI issues into their policy platforms or addressed discrimination against the LGBTQI community. Positively, some individual candidates have expressed support for LGBTQI rights, and activists found some candidates to be more receptive to discussing LGBTQI issues than in previous elections. To that end, many pro-Western political parties signed an interparty pledge and memorandum of understanding pledging to eliminate discrimination against LGBTQI in Georgia and to eschew homophobic language in their campaigns.

In 2020, a new mandatory gender quota obliged political parties to present proportional lists on which at least one of every four candidates must be a different gender. All 50 registered electoral subjects adopted the gender quota, with 29 qualifying for 30-percent additional state funding for having exceeded the requirement. The 2020 quota ensured a more inclusive parliament for Georgian women, who comprise 53.7 percent of voters but prior to the quota held only 14 percent of seats in parliament and 13 percent in local government. Some women running for office reported that they were the subject of vilification in the media and had experienced gender-specific harassment, sexist cyberbullying, insults and threats to expose their private lives. However, women dominated the election management and administration bodies. In addition to the chairperson of the CEC, women accounted for more than 60 percent of permanent and temporary positions in the DEC and 74 percent of the PECs.

Media

The Georgian media space is regulated by several laws, including the Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression, the Law on Broadcasting, the Law on Electronic Communication, the Law on Copyright and related rights, the Law on Advertising, the Law on Personal Data Protection and others. Article 17 of the Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression also on the internet.

The July 2020 amendments to the Electoral Code contained several modifications to election-related media, including limitations on time allocation for paid advertising, prohibiting broadcast of political advertisements on Election Day and eight hours before, and regulations regarding the commissioning of public polls by broadcasters. Another new provision obliged public broadcasters to provide a specific amount of free airtime for political advertising to all political parties and electoral blocs, including those not qualified for public funding.

During the pre-election period, Georgia's media space was free and diverse with numerous television, radio, newsprint and online media options accessible to most citizens. Content in Armenian and Azerbaijani languages is scarce, increasing susceptibility to disinformation from foreign sources as minority groups tend to turn to Armenian, Turkish and Russian outlets for news content and information. Existing projects by individual media outlets to broadcast information in minority languages lack a systematic approach and exist primarily with funding from international donors.

The media landscape overall was extremely polarized and tightly connected to past and present political actors or business groups. This reality contributed to an abundance of editorialized news content rather than fact-based content and was – with notable exceptions – particularly evident in the online arena⁸ where media outlets often failed to differentiate between paid and editorial content. Television media, the main source of news and information for Georgians, was commonly perceived as being either pro-government or opposition aligned. Political discourse was rarely issue based, but often held on the level of mutual accusations. Moreover, the refusal of political actors to participate in debates prevented citizens from gaining a spectrum of viewpoints and policy positions which may have impeded some citizens' ability to make informed choices at the ballot box. The Electoral Code obliged broadcasters intending to cover the elections to organize debates for all qualified electoral subjects. The GPB organized in addition, but separately, four debates with other electoral subjects.

⁸ "Online Media Monitoring Final Report. 15 June - 21 November 2020." Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, 2020, ge.undp.org/content/dam/georgia/docs/publications/DG/undp_ge_dg_election_media_monitoring_final%20report_online%20media_2020_eng.pdf

Presently, television remains the main source of information for Georgians. However, 62 percent of citizens surveyed in an IRI public opinion poll said they also access the internet on a daily basis.⁹ Though television plays a prominent role in the information space, trust in media overall is low. Georgia's most trusted TV station in terms of news and political information is Imedi TV (40% / 50% when also counting second preferences), followed by Mtavari Arkhi TV (16% / 24%), Rustavi 2 (11% / 34%) and TV Pirveli (5% / 15%). Eighty-four percent of citizens between 18 and 29 who obtain information on political parties and candidates through social media said they trust information sourced through social media a lot or somewhat more than information sourced from traditional broadcast media.¹⁰

The Georgian Public Broadcaster, GBP, struggled to win the trust and attention of broad audiences both due to perceptions of bias and less sensational content. Interlocutors with whom IRI met perceived GBP as having more pro-government content, irrespective of which party is in power. The absence of a public broadcaster accepted by the populace as trusted, neutral, and balanced exacerbated the existing zero-sum political space. Further, controversy within public broadcaster Adjara TV and Radio over the resignation and replacement of its director in April 2019 as well as a proposed government investigation into the dismissal of some of the broadcaster's employees who alleged they were wrongly targeted for being critical of the new management also fostered perceptions the outlet was not impartial or independent.¹¹ Economic sustainability for independent and regional broadcasters — an important source of information for ethnic minorities — was also a concern as well as reports of incidents involving threats against media

professionals including a widely publicized incident in Marneuli on September 29 where a journalist of Mtavari Arkhi TV was severely injured and a GPB's cameraman's equipment broken.

Another prominent feature of Georgia's media space in the pre-electoral period was disinformation from internal and external malign actors. This was most pronounced on social media where the space was ripe for agitators to create misleading content, sow public confusion and foment public discord. Facebook uncovered overt attempts by some electoral subjects to misinform the public in April 2020, identifying networks of fake social media accounts with links to companies or individuals aligned to the ruling GD party and, to a lesser degree, the UNM.¹² Other disinformation that spread during the pre-election period pertained to COVID-19, the war over Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkophobic content made by members of the APG party.

⁹ "Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia. June-July 2020." International Republican Institute, 2020, iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_june_2020_general-aug_4_corrections_1.pdf, p. 92.

¹⁰ "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia. August 4-21, 2020." International Republican Institute, 2020, iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_august_2020.pdf, pp. 48; 52.

¹¹ "Proposal on Launch of Investigation into Alleged Offence against Employees of Adjara TV". Public Defender of Georgia, October 26, 2020, ombudsman.ge/eng/akhali-ambebi/tsinadadeba-acharis-televiziis-tanamshromlebis-mimart-gankhortsielebul-savaraudo-danashaulebriv-faktze-gamodziebis-datsqebis-shesakheb

¹² In December 2019, Facebook removed 418 accounts for coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB), including 344 pages, 13 groups, 39 profiles and 22 Instagram accounts. In April 2020, Facebook said it removed 511 Facebook pages, 101 Facebook accounts, 122 groups and 56 Instagram accounts linked to Espersona company and 23 Facebook accounts, 80 pages, 41 groups and nine Instagram accounts linked to individuals associated with UNM.

ELECTION DAY

The election management bodies met their legal obligations and, absent the results management processes at the subnational level, managed the technical aspects of Election Day effectively. In general, electoral commissions adhered to prescribed Election Day opening and voting procedures and conducted their duties in a professional manner.¹³ Procedural irregularities were occasionally reported by citizen observers or observed directly by the TEAM though most procedural issues were minor.¹⁴

Voter turnout in the first round of the parliamentary elections was higher, up 5 percent from 51.63 in 2016 to 56.11 percent in 2020. Voting took place in 3,847 precincts of which 3,657 were regular precincts established in Georgia, 127 precincts were created specifically for voters in inpatient medical institutions and in isolation (quarantined, self-isolated), 11 were created for exceptional cases (10 in penitentiary and 1 in a mental health institution) and 52 were created abroad (2 in Afghanistan).

Counting and Tabulation of Results

The 2020 elections were complex and unique due to the exceptionally high number of electoral subjects and candidates – twice as much as in

2016.¹⁵ To its credit and in the spirit of transparency, the CEC promptly made public all PEC level summary protocols, attached explanatory notes and protocols of amendments including protocols with obvious mathematical mismatches and other defects—though a number of protocols were swiftly corrected following Election Day. Still, this important mechanism of transparency was abused by some political actors who disseminated defective protocols to claim the results count was falsified and to discredit the CEC. A dedicated Facebook page of dubious origin called “Forged Protocols” was even created for this effort.¹⁶

Monitoring groups including the TEAM, noted there were indeed a high number of protocols mathematically imbalanced or having other defects. For example, the NGO iFact recalculated the results of all proportional protocols taking into account protocols of amendments composed on election night or during the morning of November 1st.¹⁷ The organization concluded that 930 of 3,791 in-county proportional protocols (25 percent) were imbalanced and had a surplus or a shortage of ballots in comparison with the number of participating voters.¹⁸ In the case of some districts this percentage was much higher and having more than 40 percent of imbalanced protocols.¹⁹

¹³ Voters participated on the basis of valid documents in 99.6 percent of the observed precincts. Ballots were properly signed and sealed by registrars in 99.5 percent of observations. Voters were inked in 98.6 percent of observations. Secrecy of the vote was maintained in 95.6 percent of precincts. ISFED’s election day [press release](#) on voting and polling stations closing process.

¹⁴ Though IRI did not conduct a systematic observation of polling stations or district election commissions TEAM analysts did monitor select polling stations in Tbilisi on Election Day. For example, a precinct opened with delay due to late arrival of citizen observers and without requisite registration protocol displayed publicly; more than one party representative present at once; violation of the lottery procedure for duties distribution; not inking voters; lack of functioning photocopy machines though that was due to equipment disfunction rather than procedural irregularity.

¹⁵ 50 electoral subjects registered party list while for the 2016 parliamentary elections only 25.

¹⁶ The page created already on September 3rd is available [here](#).

¹⁷ If “signed by all members of the commission”, which is an odd threshold as the required minimal quorum is seven members. See iFact’s [webpage](#).

¹⁸ Higher or lower the cumulative number of valid and invalid ballots in comparison with the number of participating voters (in fact, the number of signatures on the voter lists).

¹⁹ According to the iFact [database](#) in Saburtalo district 46 percent of proportional protocols were imbalanced, in Isani 42 percent, in Didube-Chughureti 42 percent, in Batumi 41.6 percent and in Kobuleti 45.2 percent.

The CEC tried to mitigate the developing crisis by issuing several explanatory statements.²⁰ To explain the number of imbalanced protocols, the CEC asserted that some pre-election trainings of lower election commissions were only conducted with secretaries; that the increase in electoral subjects increased the risk of human error; and that the vast majority of affected proportional protocols were imbalanced by less than five ballots. While this was true, still there were a number of precincts with more substantial imbalances. For example, in the Marneuli-Gardabani electoral district, after completion of the entire protocol correction and complaint-handling procedures, 37 imbalanced proportionate protocols still exist, of which 13 by more than five ballots.²¹ The combined deviation in these 13 precincts proportional protocols was 217 ballots.

The TEAM identified a number of factors that contributed to the high number of imbalanced protocols namely, weak verification mechanisms to ensure and enforce that the PEC level protocols were cross-checked and mathematically correct before delivery to district level commissions.²² Oddly, even protocols with obvious mathematical errors were initially accepted by DEC's, indicating a serious deficiency in the applied procedures. To the greatest extent possible, numerical accuracy of PEC level results protocols should be checked and verified at the polling station level i.e., by precinct commissions when they have easy access to electoral materials and can conduct an immediate check and recount. Conducting the verification

procedure on the DEC level is more problematic, as it should involve reopening previously sealed PEC materials, could delay the tabulation process and forces decisions whether and to what extent a DEC should reopen, verify, and recount results or whether it should accept at face value other documentation produced by PECs.

Summary protocols utilized during the 2020 elections did not contain such basic figures as the number of ballots taken from ballot boxes and the cumulative number of votes received by all subjects plus invalid votes.²³ The latter is fundamentally important to ensure the accuracy of the counted results and should be cross-checked against the number of participating voters (established on the basis of signatures). Mandating and enforcing precinct officials to do this simple cumulative calculation (votes for all subjects plus invalid votes), inserting the result of the calculation into the summary protocol after comparison with the number of signatures of voters (preferably also with the number of ballots taken from ballot boxes) as well as obliging precinct officials to repeat the counting procedure in cases of substantial discrepancy, should limit the number of protocols with obvious mathematical mistakes that end up at district level election commissions in the future.²⁴

Another peculiarity with the summary protocols was that summary protocols for both the proportional list vote and the single-member majoritarian vote had the same number of participating voters but not all voters who

²⁰ November 1st [Statement on Incorrect Information Disseminated about PEC Summary Protocols of Election Results](#), November 2th [Statement on Deliberate Disinformation Concerning Summary Protocols](#), November 4th [Statement on Disinformation Disseminated in Social Media](#).

²¹ Precinct 13.21.21 is 7 ballots short, 13.21.26 is 21 ballots short, 13.21.41 – 13 ballots short, 13.21.59 – 9 ballots short, 13.22.22 – 6 ballots short, 13.22.25 – 8 ballots short, 13.22.30 – 11 ballots short, 13.22.34 – 8 ballots short, 13.22.40 – 9 ballots short, 13.22.48 – 11 ballots short, 13.22.65 – 17 ballots short, 13.22.69 – 14 ballots short, 13.22.89 – 83 ballots short. See the CEC combined data available [here](#).

²² The 2020 CEC [Guidelines for the Members of Precinct Election Commissions](#) includes a one sentence remark on page 44 on the necessity to verify the accuracy of the count "PEC chairperson shall announce the number of votes given to each electoral subject and together with the PEC secretary shall verify the accuracy of the data."

²³ The OSCE/ODIHR EOM to the 2008 parliamentary elections in its [final report](#) pointed out that "the fact that the summary protocols were 'simplified' by not including important data makes it difficult to reconcile the number contained in the protocols." The missing data included "the number of ballots in the ballot boxes [that] were not included in the protocol". The report stated that "most of these problems concerned the total sum of the votes for election subjects and invalid votes being less than the number of signatures; however, there were cases where the total number of votes for the election subjects and invalid votes exceeded the number of signatures in the voter list (...)", which is notably similar to the problems recorded during the 2020 parliamentary elections.

²⁴ The precinct level summary protocols form could be revised to include additional instruction and a row with a box (immediately below the place for the number of invalid ballots - column N6) where the commission should be obliged to insert the combined number of votes for each electoral subject plus invalid ballots and cross-check this with the above number of participating voters (column N4). For this moment only the combined number of participating voters -established on the base of signatures of voters and given as the same for both proportional and majoritarian protocol, is provided.

participated in the proportional list vote had the right to vote in the majoritarian race (because their domicile of record was different than where they voted). Recording the same number of participating voters for the majoritarian summary protocols as the proportional summary protocols can cause additional confusion, mismatched results and pose a practical challenge to verifying whether the calculation of the total number of valid ballots received for electoral subjects plus invalid ballots match with the number of voters who actually participated in the majoritarian vote.²⁵ Further, the legal regulations and procedures allow precinct-level election commissions to modify a summary protocol through the use of a CEC-designed “amendment protocol”. The practice is positive in that it allows for tracking, documenting and correcting errors in the summary protocols. However, the July 2017 amendment to the Election Code inserted into the list of “Powers of a PEC” the authority, when needed, to correct a summary protocol after the vote, up to and including the day after Election Day when access to original material has already been sealed.²⁶ The PEC’s right to amend data in the summary protocol without access to and verification of the source documentation on the day after the vote is, at best, based on precinct members’ memory, opinion and PEC explanatory notes and, at worst, susceptible to manipulation.

The CEC statistical data shows the scale of problems related to imbalanced protocols.²⁷ The number of PECs that, after the first-round

vote, considered it necessary to compose protocols of amendment was 507 (13 percent) for the proportional vote and 584 (15 percent) for majoritarian. In total, there were at least 1,091 protocols of amendments. During the previous 2016 parliamentary elections the total protocols of amendments was 624. Thus, there was an increase in the number of protocols of amendments by 74 percent.²⁸ The data and significant increase in the number of amended protocols illustrate that results tabulations were often not adequately cross-checked for mathematical balance before protocols were composed and submitted to the district level commissions.²⁹

According to the 2019 Council of Europe commissioned Analysis of Electoral Dispute Resolution in Georgia, DEC’s made amendments to precinct level summary protocols “based on a statement of a representative of a lower-level administrative body may not be viewed as the standard of administrative proceedings that will be trusted by election stakeholders.”³⁰ In 2020 only 39 partial recounts were conducted by DEC’s and some of the amendments were made solely on the basis of explanatory notes from PEC members, a practice that undermines public confidence in the results. The large number of amendments (made to summary protocols was also visible on a regional level particularly in the Kvemo Kartli region where three majoritarian constituencies were created and where the Human Rights Center combined statistics for the correction of summary protocols

²⁵ In addition to comparing the number of ballots taken from ballot boxes. While a small shortage of a few ballots can be a natural thing, a larger discrepancy should be treated as a warning that there can be a mistake in a calculation and a recount should be conducted to check the results and (if possible) establish a reason for the discrepancy. The same should be done in the case of even a single ballot surplus. This problem was noted by the OSCE/ODIHR mission during the previous parliamentary elections. In the 2016 OSCE [final report](#) “a number of corrections were required for various reasons, including unclear instructions on how to count voter signatures in the special voter lists (those only voting in the proportional contest) when filling the protocols for the majoritarian results.”

²⁶ Article 26(2) (d1) states that PEC shall “when needed, not later than the day following the polling day, draw up a protocol amending the summary protocol of the polling results of the PEC if there are statements of the members of a respective PEC and/or other legal and factual grounds”.

²⁷ See CEC press release on [Statistical Information on Amendment Protocols and Explanations](#).

²⁸ During the 2016 parliamentary elections PEC members attached 1,089 explanatory notes while in 2020 only 615 explanatory notes were attached indicating a significant increase in the number of amended summary protocols that should likely have been accompanied by related explanatory notes. It seems that in 2020 PECs less often considered it necessary to justify and explain the reasoning for protocols of amendments, than during the previous parliamentary elections. Moreover, the composed explanatory notes can be associated with a change in the most critical data – the number of votes assigned to election subjects. This is because while the number of explanatory notes has dropped drastically, at the same time drastically increased the number of protocols of amendments that affected the number of votes received by electoral subjects. In the case of the 2017 local elections this was 198 protocols of amendments while in the case of the 2020 parliamentary elections 523 protocols, an increase by 164 percent.

²⁹ Otherwise, the PECs concerned will have to recalculate and correct obvious discrepancies - such as a significant shortage or surplus of ballots - before drafting summary protocols.

³⁰ Page 25. available [here](#).

and attached explanatory notes totalled 450 PECs, 190 attached explanatory notes or protocols of amendment, which is 42.2 percent of all protocols for the region.³¹

The amendments described above do not explain all imbalances. According to the CEC data, a “so called misbalance” remained in 943 proportional protocols.³² More than 67 proportional protocols were short by 10 or more ballots – the difference between the number of signatures on voter lists and the sum of invalid votes plus the combined number of votes for all electoral subjects. This shortage was particularly acute in the Marneuli-Gardabani district number 13 (Kvemo Kartli region) where seven precincts of 124 in total were short more than 10 ballots. In these seven precincts, the protocols indicate that a total of 170 signatures more than the ballots taken from the ballot boxes.³³

Opposition parties, namely those under the formal United Opposition, along with EG, United Georgia, Girchi, Strategy Aghmeshenabeli and Victorious Georgia – established a Vote Fraud Detection Center in the capital city. The purpose of the Center was to centralize all complaints and alleged violations taking place on Election-Day. Though innovative in nature, the Voter Fraud Detection Center seemingly failed to systematically collect the requisite evidence to substantiate their claims.

Most of the election-related complaints and appeals filed by observers pertained to these imbalances in the summary protocols. Notwithstanding, the large numbers of imbalanced summary protocols and practice of verifying (and amending) results—while serious and corrosive to the overall integrity of the process—were not at a scale to be dispositive of the overall election results.

Results

As a result of a reduced threshold, on October 31 nine parties reached or exceeded the one percent minimum vote share on the proportional list required to achieve parliamentary status. As was expected, the new electoral system (120 proportional list and 30 seats single-member majoritarian districts) also resulted in a reduction of seats for the ruling GD party – down from 115 seats in 2016.

GD and UNM met the minimum statutory gender quota, placing five women among the top 20 candidates on their party lists and three in the top ten. Three of the nine winning parties placed six women in their top 20, while Strategy Aghmashenebeli included eight. The conservative Alliance for Patriots placed a woman at the top of its list, as did the United Georgia— one of very few parties led by a woman – which missed the 1-percent threshold required to enter parliament. Another smaller opposition party led by a prominent female politician, For Justice, nominated women in half of the positions on its list but did not come close to passing the threshold. In total, 29 women were elected from the proportional lists, an increase from 14 percent in 2016 to 19 percent in 2020. The names of female members of parliament (MPs) from six parties were announced, with 15 from GD, eight from UNM, two from Strategy Aghmashenebeli, one from Lelo, one from Girchi, one from EG and one from the Alliance of Patriots.

Of the 56.11 percent of eligible citizens who voted, 50.28 percent were women. According to the CEC, more than 56 percent of the accredited election observers were also women. Although persons with disabilities could make use of informational material made available by the CEC to assist them in accessing the available services, turnout among this group of voters was low.

³¹ See the HRC prepared [Overview of the first and second rounds of the parliamentary elections in Kvemo Kartli](#).

³² Data as on November 14, two weeks after the election day.

³³ Precinct 13.21.26 – 21 ballots less, 13.21.41 – 13, 13.22.30 – 11, 13.22.48 – 11, 13.22.65 – 17, 13.22.69 – 14 and 13.22.89 – 83. See the CEC combined [table](#) with data from all imbalanced proportional protocols.

Only 2.9 percent of persons with registered disabilities voted in the 2018 presidential election. Advocacy groups warned that the COVID-19 pandemic could suppress turnout among voters with disabilities, who might have been more motivated to participate had their issues featured more prominently in political-party programs and campaigns. The CEC confirmed that as few as 14 wheelchair users had contacted the CEC by Election Day to request access to an adapted polling station in their voting district. As a result of the reduction in majoritarian districts and where smaller districts merged, the representation of ethnic minorities in parliament shrank from seven to six seats, or four percent of parliament, none of whom are women.

The results demonstrate the long-standing trend of ethnic-minority support for the majority party, irrespective of which party is in power. Five representatives of the GD were elected, three from the party list and two as majoritarian candidates. One opposition candidate was elected from the UNM list. Not all nine parties that crossed the one percent threshold included ethnic-minority candidates on their lists, and only one party placed one such candidate among its top ten. Another four parties included ethnic-minority candidates among the top 20 or 30 candidates, whereas most were placed after the 50th candidate on the party list. Some 13 percent of the population in Georgia falls into ethnic-minority groups, but only members of the two largest groups, Azerbaijani and Armenian, will enter the new parliament.

Having achieved more than 40 percent of the vote share before the November 21 runoff, the GD secured the requisite 40 percent share to unilaterally form a government. In majoritarian districts, the GD received the most vote share in 29 out of 30 constituencies. In 13 constituencies, GD achieved more than 50 percent of the vote, which was sufficient to secure the seat without going to a runoff. The GD contested the remaining 17

majoritarian constituencies in runoff elections on November 21.

Party	% Vote Share
Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia	48.23%
United National Movement – United Opposition Bloc	27.17%
European Georgia	3.79%
Strategy Agmashenebeli	3.15%
Lelo	3.15%
Alliance of Patriots of Georgia	3.14%
Girchi	2.89%
Citizens	1.32%
Labour Party	1%

Irregularities

Election Day irregularities that were prominent during previous elections surfaced again in 2020. The election management body accredited 80,819 representatives of electoral subjects (party and bloc observers), 46,981 citizen observers and 5,971 media representatives to observe on Election Day.³⁴ Observer organizations widely reported that the mechanism for non-partisan election observation was abused by many political parties noting widespread overcrowding and the excessive presence of electoral subject and media representatives. Legislative amendments aimed at restricting the undue activity of representatives of electoral subjects, such as prohibitions against campaigning in or near polling stations, had little practical effect.³⁵ Electoral subject observers' (political party representatives) excessive presence in and around polling stations on Election Day contributed to a chaotic voting atmosphere and raised questions about the extent to which voters were free to cast their vote without undue pressure from political representatives who (ostensibly) posed as citizen observers.

³⁴ "Summary News-Briefing of the CEC Chairperson." Central Election Commission, 30 October 2020, cesko.ge/eng/list/show/122181-tseskos-tavmdjdomaris-shemadjamebeli-sainformatsio-brifingi

³⁵ Election Code article 45(12) determines that "It shall be prohibited to physically obstruct the movement of a voter within the polling station or within 25 meters of the polling station".

In 2016, cases of physical violence and threats were reported by ISFED in one percent of observed precincts while in 2020, ISFED reported cases of physical violence and threats in two percent of observed precincts, representing a 100 percent increase.³⁶ Violent confrontations occurred inside and in close proximity to polling stations in Saburtalo, Samgori, Gldani, Gurjaani-Sagarejo-Signagi-Dedoplistskaro, Rustavi-Gardabani, Marneuli-Gardabani, Kutaisi, Isani-Samgori, and Zugdidi districts³⁷. Observers in the densely populated ethnic minority regions also reported violations of electoral procedures and health protocols on Election Day and cases in which voters were pressured inside and outside polling stations or the secrecy of the vote was not observed.²⁰ While the Human Rights Center noted that some voters' weak Georgian language skills impeded PEC chairs from communicating with voters and observers in some ethnic-minority villages. Unlawful voting was also reported by observers in Marneuli.³⁸

Other concerns were raised about the media. The media was given broad access to all procedural steps of election administration however, in some locations, local observer organizations reported threats and violence against journalists, interference in their work, and excessive filming or photographing of voters by representatives of media in a manner inconsistent with international standards and norms. The politically-aligned media outlet Newpost was mentioned 13 times in observer reports from GYLA and ISFED for excessive photographing of voters, potentially compromising the secrecy of the vote, while

Transparency International-Georgia (TI-Georgia) in its statement referred to a "pattern of media organization Newpost's representatives taking photos of all voters inside polling stations" .³⁹

This widely reported presence of representatives from a media outlet taking photographs of voters or filming voters at close range (and allegedly with facial recognition software) raised concerns regarding citizens' right to a private ballot. According to information received by local observer groups, some PEC officials swiftly addressed observer concerns regarding intrusive journalists while other complaints were not satisfied. However, the disproportionate presence of media representative observers on Election Day compared to observers representing electoral subjects raised concerns that politically aligned media outlets, at times, disrupted administrative processes and subverted citizens' right to privacy.

Some reporters were also the victims of Election Day violence. The most severe incident involved journalists in Gldani District, Tbilisi, where physical confrontations broke out between supporters of ruling and opposition parties. As a result, journalists from online news outlet Publika and TV Pirveli who were among a group caught in the violent political scuffle were injured while filming the scene and reporting on the incident. The melee resulted in the detention and arrest of six people.⁴⁰ In a second incident, police reportedly prevented a TV Pirveli journalist from entering a polling station in the village of Karajala (Telavi) on the grounds that the journalist could interfere with the election commission's work.

³⁶ Data from ISFED election day press release on voting and polling stations closing process. <https://isfed.ge/geo/presrelizebi/kenchiskris-mimdinareobisa-da-ubnis-dakhurvis-protsebi->

³⁷ Baramidze, David. "ElectionsPortal.Ge." ElectionsProtal.Ge, www.electionsportal.ge/eng/map and "შინაგან საქმეთა მინისტრის პირველი მოადგილის - კახაბერ საბანაძის ბრიფინგი." საქართველოს შინაგან საქმეთა სამინისტრო, police.ge/ge/shinagan-saqmeta-ministris-pirveli-moadgilis-kakhaber-sabanadzis-brifingi/14094.

³⁸ A case of multiple voting was [video](#) recorded by a TI observer in Marneuli precinct 13.22.65. Description and details of subsequent legal proceedings are available in the TI [report](#) on misuse of administrative resources (pages 21-24). The PMMG [reported](#) attempts of multiple voting by the same persons in precinct 13.22.49, an attempt to vote by a person under the minimum age who received a ballot in precinct 13.22.35 and a case of four ballots found in an envelope during the count in precinct 13.22.72.

³⁹ "Summary of Monitoring of 31 October 2020 Parliamentary Elections." Transparency International, 1 November 2020, transparency.ge/en/post/summary-monitoring-31-october-2020-parliamentary-elections

⁴⁰ "Press Briefing of the First Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs - Kakhaber Sabanadze." Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1 Nov. 2020, police.ge/en/shinagan-saqmetaministris-pirveli-moadgilis-kakhaber-sabanadzis-brifingi/14096

The Communications Commission (GNCC), the national broadcasting regulatory body, drew protocols of administrative offense against five television channels — namely Mtavari Arkhi, Imedi, Palitra and Ilion — for publishing a public-opinion poll within 48 hours before the start of Election Day voting and against Formula television for failure to provide the information foreseen by law when publishing an opinion poll.⁴¹

Another concerning irregularity was the significant increase in the number of cases of intimidation and violence directed against citizen observers.

RUNOFF ELECTION

Twenty parties rejected the results of the October 31 parliamentary elections (including all eight that passed the one percent threshold to achieve parliamentary representation) claiming that systemic shortcomings and irregularities affected the overall integrity (and potentially the results) of the elections. As a result of the standoff, the ruling GD party—which had candidates in each of the remaining 17 districts —was the sole participant in the November runoff elections (where candidates did not meet the minimum threshold of 50 percent of votes in the first round), resulting in GD securing all 17 remaining majoritarian seats, in addition to the 61 proportional seats and 13 already-won majoritarian seats in the new parliament (91 in total). Of the 107 women who ran for majoritarian seats in the first round— which were not subject to the gender quota — none were elected and only four advanced to the second, runoff election. If not for the boycott, nine runoff races outside of Tbilisi would have been between GD and UNM candidates, while in Tbilisi, GD would have competed with UNM (in three constituencies), European Georgia (in two constituencies), the

In particular, the intimidation of representatives of observer organizations ISFED, GYLA and TI. This was particularly prominent during Election Day and during the complaint resolution process and prompted the Georgia Public Defender to issue a public statement denouncing intimidation of observers on November 3.⁴² The climate of intimidation and calamity in many polling stations and directed toward independent observers affected voters' freedom to choose and observers' ability to operate, respectively.

Labour Party (in one constituency), Girchi New Political Center (in one constituency) and the Citizens Party (in one constituency). Having achieved more than 40 percent of the vote share before the November 21 runoff, the GD secured the requisite 40 percent share during the first round to unilaterally form a government, ultimately affording GD 61 seats. In addition, having won all 30 majoritarian districts, GD ultimately won 91 collective seats. However, in accordance with the Election Code, in order to avoid single-party dominance in future Parliamentary convocations, no one party can secure more than 90 seats. As such, GD ultimately finished with 90 seats, which distributed the remaining 60 to opposition parties, based on the results of the proportional vote.

⁴¹ "Communications Commission Draws Protocol on Mtavari Arkhi, Imedi, Formula and Palitra TV for Violation of Election Code, TV Pirveli and 4 Regional Broadcasters – No [in Georgian]." Communications Council, 5 Nov. 2020, comcom.ge/ge/news/press-releases/komunikaciebis-komisiam-saarchevno-kodeqsisdargvestvis-mtvar-arxs-imed-formulas-da-palitra-tv-is-oqmi-sheudgina-tv-pirvels-da-4-regionuli-mauwyebels-ara.page

⁴² "Observer organizations are providing me information regarding abusive and insulting attitudes towards their representatives by the members of the district election commissions during complaints deliberation process, which often creates intimidating environment." from November 3 post on the Public Defender private Facebook page.

POST-ELECTION PERIOD

Complaints and Appeals

According to the CEC, 2,092 complaints were submitted at the District Election Commissions (DEC) by local observer organizations and election subjects. Among the complaints were those filed by the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA) pertaining to the results management whereby DEC members routinely corrected summary protocols based on the “explanatory notes” of PEC members, sometimes even before reviewing the complaint, and in such a manner that the sealed documents were not opened nor was the data in the explanation notes verified.

Though the complainants only had a two-day window to file a formal appeal GYLA, Transparency International (TI), ISFED and Public Movement Multinational Georgia (PMMG) managed to file some 400 appeals against PEC decisions in which claimants requested a recount and/or results annulment. Most were unsuccessful in their pursuit to recount or annul the results though of the four, GYLA had the highest success rate.⁴³ Recounts of 39 polling stations were conducted by DEC. Of the recounts that took place, six were initiated by the DEC members, 14 were the result of a complaint and 19 were on the basis of a court decision.

In addition to complaints and appeals filed immediately following Election Day, according to GYLA, TI and ISFED, during the pre-election period, some 250 election-related violations were submitted to the DEC. The incidents spanned

a range of alleged offenses, from abuse of administrative resources, such as public servants campaigning during working hours. It was widely reported that complaints lodged to DEC/PECs were often rejected without official “protocol of administrative offense” on grounds that the claimant did not register the complaint properly, submitted it after the legal deadline or submitted it to the wrong election administration authority. According to the CEC, the total number of complaints submitted by observers and election subjects that were procedurally incorrect or were not discussed on merits was 1,116, of these 975 (87.37%) are submitted by the election subjects and 141 (12.63%) by the observers.

Though the constitution ensures the rights of citizens for effective dispute resolution, many NGOs and political actors with whom the TEAM interacted perceived law enforcement’s effort to investigate claims of electoral malpractice to be insufficient.⁴⁴ In the days leading up to Election Day, there were allegedly 72 reports of election-related violations under investigation at the Ministry of Interior, yet few were ever prosecuted. Of some 300 total citizen observer reports of election-related violations, it has not been made public the number of cases that were found to have sufficient evidence and legal merit by the Prosecutor’s Office. Nor has the Prosecutor’s Office made public the number of cases brought before the Criminal Court, raising concerns both about citizens’ fundamental right to redress and the will of law enforcement to prosecute offenders.

⁴³ According to the CEC Total number of complaints submitted by local observer organizations amounted to 633, of these 492 (77.73%) were legally correct (submitted following the deadline and rules of appeal), out of which 178 (36.18%) were upheld/partially upheld and 311 (63.21%) were not upheld, one (0.20%) complaint was submitted to the relevant entity for further response and two (0.41%) complaints were withdrawn by the nominating organization. Complaints that were legally incorrect (submitted by violating the deadline and rules of appeal) amounted to 141 (22.27%). As for the complaints submitted by the election subjects - on E-day and the following days, in total, 1 459 complaints were submitted at the DEC members. Out of the complaints submitted by the election subjects 484 (33.17%) were legally correct (submitted following the deadline and rules of appeal), out of the mentioned number 94 (19.42%) were upheld/partially upheld and 387 (79.96%) were not upheld, one (0.21%) was transferred to the relevant entity for further response, two (0.41%) complaints were withdrawn by the nominating organization. Complaints that were legally incorrect (submitted by violating the deadline and rules of appeal) amounted to 975 (66.83%).

⁴⁴ Constitution of Georgia. Article 31 – Procedural right. 1. Every person has the right to apply to a court to defend his/her rights. The right to a fair and timely trial shall be ensured. 2. Every person shall be tried only by a court that has jurisdiction over the case. 3. The right to defence shall be guaranteed. Everyone has the right to defend his/her rights before a court in person or through a lawyer, or through a representative in cases defined by law. The unrestricted exercise of the rights of a lawyer, as well as the right of lawyers to self-organisation, shall be guaranteed by law.

Though the Interagency Commission for Free and Fair Elections (IACFFE) allegedly initiated more than 200 investigations into election-related complaints, their investigations received little media attention relative to other political news.⁴⁵ In addition, the Election Code in its current form does not extend to voters the right to file election-related complaints for any reason with the exception of voters' exclusion from the voter list. In line with the 1990

Copenhagen Declaration on Elections the right of every voter to file a complaint, regardless of its content, should be granted. To ensure aggrieved claimants' fundamental right to effective remedy is upheld, further legal reforms are needed to safeguard the rights of parties, observers, and voters to file complaints and have their complaints adjudicated promptly.

CONCLUSION

Electoral reforms which enabled smaller parties to enter the Parliament and overcome a bipolar system, for the first time, resulted in greater political and gender representation.

Electoral management bodies instituted safety measures to stem the spread of COVID-19 prior to and on Election Day. The CEC, electoral subjects and voters proved adaptable in addressing and responding to the challenges created by the COVID-19. Voters expressed their enthusiasm to vote, according to safety procedures, despite the health risks. The inclusive registration of electoral subjects, initiative groups, party lists and individual candidates as well as training for election officials and civic education initiative demonstrated a high degree of competence on the part of CEC. Further, the CEC's flexibility during a global pandemic to facilitate voting for the quarantined, self-isolated and infected was praiseworthy.

However, the climate of intimidation, reports of abuse of state administrative resources, episodes of violence against journalists, and imbalanced results summary protocols detracted from the above-referenced achievements. Further, a poor mitigation strategy at the upper levels of the election commission did little to build public confidence in electoral institutions in the wake of concerns over imbalances in the results protocol.

At the same time, party polemics degraded trust at all levels of the election administration - particularly by opposition parties who persistently attempted to discredit the CEC. Moreover, the selection procedures and composition of electoral management bodies again highlighted a shallow parliamentary representation on subnational election commissions, especially in executive positions, and in a manner that is particularly harmful to trust in low level election commissions. Lastly, poor implementation of the complaints adjudication and resolution process has stymied the rights of political stakeholders and civil society to pursue legal claims, as they are more focused on overcoming procedural hurdles than on the content of each claim.

The media environment was free, giving opportunity for all political affiliations to communicate to voters. However, media was also dominated by the two major parties, which exacerbated existing polemics. Moving forward, the government should communicate its policies to citizens on diverse media platforms. There was a notable decrease in hate speech from politicians and political parties against their opponents on broadcast media but disinformation and propaganda on social media was prevalent. Refusal by certain parties and candidates to participate in pre-election debates, as well as

⁴⁵ The Inter-Agency Commission for Free and Fair Elections is a multi-organizational, rapid reaction mechanism created by the Georgian Ministry of Justice in 2010 as the Inter-Agency Task Force for Free and Fair Elections whose mandate is to enhance coordination between various governmental agencies, civil society groups and international organizations in order to ensure that elections are held in a free and transparent manner.

the continued attacks on journalists in the line of duty leaves much room for improvement. The blurring of boundaries between ruling parties and the state, as well as between politics and media have persisted across successive administrations and elections and has (negatively) normalized electoral violations. Many of the persistent violations fall under the Georgian criminal code, yet perpetrators often continue with impunity. These worrisome trends could further negatively impact full public acceptance of such practices, including subverting the quality and credibility of independent journalism.

The 2020 adoption of the gender quota not only ensured greater participation and representation of women in the current Parliament but ensured the same level of representation in the 2021 local elections. Changes to the electoral code also created a framework for majoritarian races in densely populated ethnic minority areas, fostering a more open and competitive electoral environment than in the past. The CEC made significant and commendable strides to ensure greater inclusion of under-represented groups in the electoral process, including dissemination of electoral materials in minority languages, provision of voting frames for the blind, translation of information videos into sign language and increases to the number of adapted polling stations with wheelchair accessibility. These unprecedented achievements should be built upon and sustained.

Electoral violence and coercion created an intimidating environment for voters, especially in regions densely populated with ethnic minorities. Despite achievements to increase women's political participation, women candidates running for office are still subjected to gender-specific harassment, which has included cyber-bullying and threats of

revelations about their private lives. In addition, despite increased openness, ethnic minority candidates still occupy few positions on party lists, and primarily in low positions. Vote buying, bribery, intimidation, misuse of administrative resources, allegations of criminal elements – each of these issues, whether alleged by the ruling party or opposition parties further contributed to a growing trust deficit amongst Georgia's leaders.

Despite the limitations of conducting an election during a global pandemic, a significant number of political actors not only registered to compete but managed to campaign in various ways. Of those, nine parties crossed the threshold, representing a diversity of ideological platforms, ethnic backgrounds, gender, and experience. While the campaign environment was marked by extreme polarization, opposition parties, many whose interests and policy initiatives diverged, were able to unify. The lack of political acumen to manage the post-election negotiations notwithstanding, many parties were innovative in their campaign and citizen engagement strategies, invested in new media outreach, and even at times demonstrated progress in setting differences aside to work toward a common goal.

Democracy is both resilient and fragile but through substantive engagement in the legislative process, strengthening governing institutions through diverse representation, and prioritizing citizen needs over political rivalries, Georgia can cement a sustainable path to democracy and full European integration.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the spirit of international cooperation and continued support for Georgia's democratic aspirations, the International Republican Institution (IRI) Technical Election Assessment Mission (TEAM) offers 26 key findings and recommendations.

Recommendations to the Central Election Commission:

Pre-election

1. International and domestic observer communities recommended in previous election reports that the government of Georgia revamp the election and appointment process for district and precinct commission members; however, this was not addressed by Parliament. If the current model for the appointment of electoral commissions is continued, the regulation for selecting party-appointed members must be revised to ensure a more balanced representation of parliamentary parties. To this end, a return to the previously used principle of one party receiving a maximum of one appointee to the election commission at each level is recommended to increase inclusiveness and regain the trust in the election commissions.

Election Day

2. Many interlocutors with whom the TEAM met expressed lack of faith in the adjudication and resolution of election complaints by the CEC and in particular, subnational election commissions. The CEC and its lower administrative units should examine complaints on their merits and work to expeditiously resolve complaints taking in to account the scale and magnitude of complaints. Where the validity of the results count is in question, a recount of results must take place more swiftly and transparently in future elections.
3. Apart from the transparent manner that the CEC made results summary protocols available for public scrutiny, the TEAM noted that the necessary infrastructure and protocols to verify precinct level results requires change. In order to ensure that the results of future elections are accepted by the populace, the CEC should take immediate steps to more rigorous processes for counting and verifying results including, but not limited to, revising the controversial procedure for amending results summary protocols. Moreover, the introduction and use of new voting technologies increases the risk of exacerbating the current trust deficit and should not be made without examining whether such a decision reflects real needs as well as in-depth study into its procurement, planning, testing, certification, implementation, public consultation and whether election commissions and the public have sufficient technology literacy to ensure its intended purpose.
4. Though the administrative aspects of Election Day were conducted in a professional manner and according to prescribed laws, the content of the precinct level summary protocols, associated guidelines, procedures, and legal regulations should be revised to introduce stronger mechanisms to ensure and enforce that the received results are mathematically correct, always verified and, that in

the event of substantial discrepancy, an immediate recount is performed on the precinct premise to verify the accuracy of the results.

5. The CEC Training Centre should meticulously analyse all shortcomings and mistakes in precinct level results summary protocols and on this basis prepare a separate training module aimed at reducing the number of inaccuracies (and the number of grossly imbalanced protocols sent to district level commissions). The training module should contain case studies of the most common mistakes and practical exercises focused on correct calculation, verification and recording of the results.
6. Concerns regarding the intimidation of independent citizen observer organizations were raised by various stakeholders with precinct level election commission personnel most frequently reported as the perpetrators. Violence and intimidation in any form, particularly against observers (and journalists), has no place in democratic elections. To ensure that the rights of nonpartisan, independent observers are upheld and that observers can work without interference, all election commission members — especially those responsible for registering complaints — should respect the purpose of impartial observation and adhere to calls from the Public Defender of Georgia and eschew all forms of intimidation against observer organizations. In addition, the CEC should take steps to reinforce the Code of Conduct for all election commission staff and sanction and remove staff found in violation of the Code. In addition, citizen observers should strictly adhere to the Declaration of Principles for Non-partisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations.
7. Observer organizations widely reported that the mechanism for non-partisan election observation was abused by many political parties and media noting widespread overcrowding and the excessive presence of electoral subject and media representatives. Legislative amendments aimed at restricting the undue activity of representatives of electoral subjects, such as prohibitions against campaigning in or near polling stations, had little practical effect. The CEC should develop stricter regulations for vetting, monitoring and sanctioning non-partisan citizen observers who abuse their role and train subnational election commissions on its effective enforcement.
8. In the spirit of international instruments for holding democratic elections to which Georgia accedes, citizen observers should be permitted opportunities to vote in their place of observation.

Recommendations to the Government:

9. NGOs and political parties reported public servants and MPs who distributed social benefits or abuse of state resources. The misuse of state resources to support election activities of any party or candidate must be sanctioned in accordance with the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document. The government, Central Election Commission, State Audit Office and Interagency Commission on Free and Fair Elections should continually prohibit public servants' participation in partisan activities and the use of administrative resources in their official capacity. To promote transparency and accountability, allegations of abuse of administrative resources should be heard before an impartial court and if proven accurate, violators should be sanctioned and made public.
10. In compliance with the 1990 Copenhagen Declaration on Elections and international standards to which Georgia accedes, aggrieved citizens should be granted the right to file a complaint. Presently ordinary citizens may only file complaints related only to the accuracy of their name on the voter list. Parliament should amend the Election Code to extend the right to file electoral complaints for any reason.

11. Many interlocutors with whom the TEAM engaged perceived the Interagency Task Force for Free and Fair Elections (IACFFE) as not being effective. IACFFE should undergo an internal audit and reflection sessions to identify managerial shortcomings and consider a restructuring to hold future meetings in a professional manner conducive to participation from all electoral subjects and to fulfilling its mandate and advisory role of ensuring “that public officers prevent and respond to violations of the electoral legislation”.
12. The State Audit Office (SAO) published data on the sources of campaign financing as well as some expenditures. Though the SAO was perceived favourably among interlocutors, the TEAM noted that the office is under resourced, understaffed and lacks capacity and authority to deeply investigate and catalogue complex political donations. Parliament should increase funding to the SAO proportionate to its essential responsibilities. Additional personnel are needed to ensure adequate capacity to investigate and publish campaign finance and spending in a timely manner. Moreover, with increased government funding the SAO should conduct independent investigations into campaign financing rather than rely on NGOs and the media for information. Per the 2012 SAO law, the Ministry of Interior, Prosecutor’s Office, and SAO should better coordinate and share information on campaign financing and sanction parties in violation of the law.
13. To ensure public safety, law, and order in the post-election period the Ministry of Interior should adhere to political neutrality and human rights standards, including ensuring the right of assembly and the safety of assembly participants. Fundamental freedoms should be respected by law enforcement bodies to create a peaceful environment before, during and after the elections.

Recommendations to Law Enforcement:

14. NGOs and political actors with whom the TEAM met perceived law enforcement’s effort to investigate claims of electoral malpractice to be insufficient and expressed scepticism that law enforcement would act on their obligation to investigate and sanction offenders. To cultivate a culture of accountability, law enforcement agencies should swiftly investigate and guarantee the timely sanction of perpetrators of electoral intimidation and violence, including offenses against journalists and election observers.
15. Public communication from law enforcement bodies regarding investigations into electoral malpractice was insufficient. New legislation obligating the police and Prosecutors Office to publish information regarding investigations and proceedings in a format easily accessible to the public should be adopted to improve future elections, increase transparency, mitigate accusations of partisanship, and instill public confidence in law enforcement bodies.
16. Many women candidates and elected officials with whom the TEAM engaged reported encountering gender-based harassment, cyberbullying and abuse. Based on the 2019 amendments to the anti-discrimination law, sexual harassment is a crime punishable by sanctions. However, enforcement of the law remains weak. Law enforcement should take steps to end the culture of impunity for sexual misconduct including violations of the right to respect private and family life.

Recommendations to Political Parties, Candidates and Campaign Teams:

- 17.** Many NGOs highlighted the prevalence of threats, intimidation, and politically motivated violence during the campaign period. The increase in physical violence in the run-up to Election Day, coercion and other acts of violence constitute violations of the Criminal Code of Georgia. Political parties, candidates and campaign teams must encourage their supporters to abstain from violence, provocation, or intimidation, and engage in negotiations through parliamentary and legal means, or through political debate, to express their positions. Parties must engage in constructive debate that focuses on the priority concerns of Georgians, including the issues of ethnic-minority populations, vulnerable and marginalized groups.
- 18.** Political parties, electoral subjects and their coordinators should adhere to the Political Party Code of Conduct and the Interagency Commission on Free and Fair Elections recommendations to ensure their supporters do not interfere with the campaign activities or observation processes of their opponents, while publicly condemning the use of coercion, intimidation, bribery.
- 19.** Political parties should eschew and publicly condemn the manipulation of social media to deliberately obscure party identities, foment discord and sow disinformation to confuse the electorate.
- 20.** Given the historic gains in women's political participation in Georgia and because of the recently passed gender quota, political parties should take steps to make equitable investments in women members. Continued support to women through skill-building and training on the roles and responsibilities of elected leaders will elevate the quality of governance for all Georgians.
- 21.** Underrepresented groups reported that political candidates only address minority constituents immediately prior to elections. To avoid further marginalization of underrepresented groups, political parties should make every effort to conduct outreach to minority groups throughout the year including establishing regional offices and developing campaign materials in minority languages. Further, youth political participation remains low in Georgia especially in the Kvemo Kartli region among the ethnic Azerbaijani, in the Pankisi region among Muslim Chechen (Kist) and in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region among the ethnic Armenian communities. To ensure a diversity of membership and candidates from ethnic backgrounds and geographic localities, political parties must develop and/or enhance internal elections for candidate selection processes and adopt campaign messages that are as diverse as Georgia's population including investing in youth, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities outreach.

Recommendations to journalists and media organizations:

- 22.** When reporting from polling stations, journalists should exercise their professional duties in an unobtrusive way and must avoid intimidating voters. Journalists should also verify sources of information for truthfulness and accuracy, crosschecking source content without violating professional confidentiality. To enhance the quality of journalism in Georgia, invest in training programs to enable and inculcate young journalists with the knowledge and skills to create investigative programs and in-depth analysis on issues of public interest such as political campaign spending, candidates and their policy positions, and public spending on elections.
- 23.** Media outlets should strictly adhere to universal norms and practices for ethical political and elections reporting in broadcast, print and online media by ensuring compliance of their journalists with professional and ethical standards and by investing in trainings to improve objective, journalistic practices. To promote transparency and garner trust, media outlets should publish their processes for self-regulation, promote their internal self-regulatory mechanisms – perceived as weak and insufficient by some interlocutors with whom the TEAM met - and routinely publish their decisions for public scrutiny.
- 24.** To help counter foreign disinformation and increase access to information for Georgia’s ethnic minorities, invest in training programs for the media sector to increase their operational capacity and available resources for original content. The Georgian Public Broadcaster should also take steps to ensure its news content—especially television—is inclusive of and accessible to broad audiences especially Georgia’s primary minority groups to facilitate their integration into society and reduce vulnerability to disinformation from foreign and domestic malign actors.
- 25.** Interlocutors with whom the TEAM met perceived Georgia’s self-regulated media to be weak or insufficient. To promote transparency and garner trust, media outlets should publish their processes for self-regulation, promote their internal self-regulatory mechanisms and routinely publish their decisions for public scrutiny.
- 26.** The TEAM noted the frequency and quality of political debate to be inadequate and weak. For preparing for potentially challenging debates with representatives of strongly opposed parties, the Georgian Public Broadcaster and other media outlets organizing debates might consider co-moderation and/or training of journalists/hosts in de-escalating communication/mediation techniques. The General Public Broadcaster should also collaborate with CSOs to identify measures that help to improve its perception as an independent and impartial broadcaster like, for example, continuing to offer room for debate for all political actors regardless of their status as qualified or unqualified electoral subjects. The Georgian Public Broadcaster should consider collaborating with local broadcasters to ensure greater dissemination of its programs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About the TEAM

The International Republican Institute (IRI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing freedom and democracy worldwide. IRI enables political parties to become more issue-based and responsive, helps promote citizen-centered governance, and works to increase the role of marginalized groups in the political process. Since 1983, IRI has observed or assessed processes in more than 200 elections in roughly 60 countries.

IRI is grateful for the warm welcome and cooperation received from all Georgians with whom it interacted, including the Central Election Commission of Georgia, political party leaders, government officials, citizen election monitors, civil society leaders, and others. The assessment aimed to demonstrate IRI's support for credible, peaceful elections; provide an accurate and impartial report on the character of the election proceedings; and offer recommendations to improve future processes. IRI adheres to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers and follows recommended guidelines and health safety protocols set forth by the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) of Georgia.

With generous support from the U.S. Department of State, six international long-term analysts (LTAs) representing the United States, Poland, Italy, Spain, Austria, and Finland were deployed to Tbilisi beginning in late September through November 2020 and conducted over one-hundred meetings and interviews with Georgian interlocutors including government authorities, political parties, candidates, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), election commission officials, journalists, media outlets, youth networks, and others. The TEAM was led by Ms. Jessica Keegan, IRI Global Election Advisor, and Mr. Slawomir Szyszka, Ms.

Jaana Karhilo, Mr. Filippo Rosin, Mr. Juan Maria Castrillion, and Ms. Kirsten Saxinger, who analyzed the election administration, political inclusion, the legal framework, the campaign environment and the media space, respectively. The TEAM is immensely grateful for the sage insight of John DiPirro, Nino Dolidze, and Badri Kochoradze, as well as technical assistance from five exceptional Georgian researchers who worked tirelessly to provide data and source material. Without their professionalism, teamwork and guidance the TEAM would not have been possible.

About IRI in Georgia

IRI has provided valuable support to Georgia in consolidating its democratic transition and assisting in the establishment of more participatory, inclusive, transparent and accountable government processes since 2003. With support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of State, IRI works to promote accountability and inclusivity in the Georgian political landscape and assists Georgian political parties as they develop internal democratic procedures and aggregate citizen interests into their platforms. IRI provides assistance to individual parties as they work to strengthen internal structures, craft responsive communication and outreach strategies and promote an operating culture that is inclusive and allows for the participation of all sectors of Georgian society.

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