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Georgia's Parliamentary Elections—a Step Forward?

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Abstract

This article reviews the results of Georgia's 2016 parliamentary elections, assesses the pre-electoral environment and discusses the major electoral players. The article concludes that despite the overall satisfactory conduct of parliamentary elections, the political implications might be worrying. Three possible ramifications stand out. First, the elections have produced a highly polarized parliamentary configuration, where the level of political confrontation will be much more intense than it was in the previous four years, thus minimizing the chances for inter-party compromises. Second, with no institutional checks and balances and with the absence of a clear parliamentary counterweight, the Georgian Dream—Democratic Georgia government might be tempted to abuse power and leave Georgia's nascent institutional democracy in a highly vulnerable state. Third, the liberal and moderately liberal third parties performed particularly badly, which prompted a massive shake-up in the oppositional spectrum.

Overview of Results

On October 8, 2016, Georgia held its eighth parliamentary elections since independence. Georgia's constitution, which holds the cabinet accountable solely to the 150-member legislature, makes Parliament a pivotal player in its political system, and the parliamentary polls—a milestone event in the country's political life.

In Georgia's mixed electoral system, voters elect 73 MPs in majoritarian, single-seat constituencies (more than 50 percent of votes are required for an outright victory). The remaining 77 seats are distributed proportionally in the closed party-list contest among the political parties that clear a five percent threshold.

The October 8 elections ended with an overwhelming victory of the ruling party. The Georgian Dream—Democratic Georgia (GDDG) garnered 49 percent of the vote and 44 mandates in a nationwide party-list contest. The major contender—the United National Movement—finished with 27 percent and 27 mandates. The Alliance of Patriots, the third party to enter Parliament, narrowly cleared the five percent threshold and obtained six parliamentary mandates. No other potential entrants have come close to the five percent threshold, except the Free Democrats, who were just 6650 (0.37 percent) votes short of passing the target.

GDDG also secured an outright victory in 23 single-seat electoral districts in the first round of elections and won the absolute majority of runoffs on October 30, claiming a constitutional majority of 113 seats in Parliament (GDDG will be represented by 115 MPs). Only one oppositional candidate managed to win a majoritarian contest (representative of the Industrialists party) along with one GDDG-supported but formally independent candidate (former Foreign Affairs Minister Salome Zurabishvili).

The Political Legacy of the 2012 Parliamentary Elections

The 2012 parliamentary elections brought a peaceful and democratic transfer of power, Georgia's first since the first

multiparty elections unseated the Communist regime in 1990. In 2012, the Georgian Dream (GD), a coalition of multiple oppositional parties unified by the billionaire-cum-politician Bidzina Ivanishvili, unseated the incumbent President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) in a landslide victory of 55 to 41 percent.

The 2012 parliamentary elections have dramatically changed the Georgian political landscape. UNM has incurred the political cost of its hard-handed governance. The party has greatly suffered because several of its top leaders were prosecuted and imprisoned by the GD government. The combined pressure from the disgruntled electorate and from the victors' justice has stretched UNM's resources and capabilities to the breaking point.

However, the victory in 2012 also caught the Georgian Dream—a coalition that was hastily cobbled together to confront UNM—largely by surprise. Lingering disagreements within the coalition about both foreign and internal politics led to the eventual departure of the two original partners—the Free Democrats and the Republicans. The doubts cast over the GD's genuine attachment to the European course in foreign affairs (especially following the departure of its most Western-leaning members), coupled with lackluster economic performance and the devaluation of the country's national currency, have gradually eroded the party's support base. The government's tit-for-tat politics, which were aimed primarily at the United National Movement, and more recently Georgia's most-watched TV station, Rustavi 2, have also played against the ruling party both domestically and abroad.

Georgia's highly personalized politics have changed as well. President Saakashvili left the country following the 2013 presidential elections and was the governor of Ukraine's Odessa region from May 2015 until 7 November 2016. Although he remains UNM's uncontested leader, his physical absence from Georgia has lessened his impact on UNM's everyday decisions.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, the true architect of GDs victory in the 2012, resigned from his post as Prime Minister in 2013 and announced his withdrawal from active politics. Still, Ivanishvili is largely seen as remaining in charge of key political domains, such as handpicking both of his successors for the position of prime minister, vetting cabinet members and deciding on coalition politics. He has, however, distanced himself from the mundane affairs of governance.

The [incomplete] departure of the two political heavyweights has left both leading parties in a highly ambiguous state of a leadership deficit. This is particularly true for GD, which is a relatively new force with little to no experience in governing. Coupled with the dwindling popularity of UNM and GD, their relative weakness should have opened the political space for smaller and newer parties, thus making the political space more diverse and vibrant. That the electoral playing field was widely open for third-party success was well demonstrated by the large mass of disoriented voters. According to the opinion survey commissioned by the National Democratic Institute in June and July 2016, 67 percent of respondents planned to vote in parliamentary elections, but the majority of Georgians (57 percent) were politically undecided.

Pre-Election Environment and Major Political Parties

Although the electoral field has indeed witnessed some fragmentation and experimentation, UNM and the slightly re-named Georgian Dream—Democratic Georgia (GDDG) remained front-runners, polling considerably ahead of their rivals.

Six other political parties were polling close to the 5 percent threshold that is necessary to win seats in the proportional contest. The “State for the People” party, launched by the renowned opera singer and long-time philanthropist Paata Burchuladze only a few months before the elections, was a surprise challenger to the UNM-GD duo, polling at 12 percent in the International Republican Institute’s March opinion survey. However, poor party management led to embarrassing defections, and the weakly formulated ideological platform failed to impress the disenchanting voters. Later polls showed the “State for the People” struggling to clear the threshold.

Free Democrats and Republicans, the two influential junior members of the Georgian Dream coalition, both headed to the elections independently. Free Democrats, who clearly had a shot at entering Parliament on a party list, ran a sluggish campaign and failed to articulate themselves as a distinct and ideologically coherent political party. The Republicans, who were late to

end their alliance with GD and have since suffered sustained attacks from ex-PM Ivanishvili, focused their campaign on selected majoritarian districts in metropolitan areas of Tbilisi and Batumi. The three other possible entrants—a pro-Russia Democratic Movement led by Nino Burjanadze, a nativist Alliance of Patriots and the populist Labor Party—campaigning actively to mobilize their niche voters.

Interestingly, UNM and GDDG followed a somewhat similar line in their electoral campaigns. Both emphasized their renewal and favored relative political newcomers to lead their party lists. Both parties preferred to communicate with voters through the media rather than the usual massive street rallies. The leaders of UNM and GDDG—Mikheil Saakashvili and Bidzina Ivanishvili—were also closely involved in campaigning through lengthy media appearances. UNM also widely deployed door-to-door meetings and ran an innovative campaign through social media platforms.

Despite the relatively conciliatory tone of GDDG Chairman, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, and some of the newer faces on the GDDG list, the prevailing tone of their campaign has been rather aggressive in targeting the UNM. Secret audio recordings of senior UNM officials and UNM sympathizers have been uploaded to the Internet, purporting to prove their plans for upheaval. The government has failed to distance itself from these tactics, and law enforcement has failed to identify the authors of the recordings, which led UNM to allege their complicity. While the electoral campaign was mostly peaceful in the beginning, save for a few isolated incidents, closer to the elections the violence spiked, including a shootout at a campaign event in Gori and a bombing of a UNM MP’s car in Tbilisi center.

Winners and Losers in the 2016 Parliamentary Elections

Twenty-five parties/blocks and 816 majoritarian candidates contested the parliamentary elections this year. Only four parties managed to enter Parliament. The largest of the four parliamentary parties, the Georgian Dream—Democratic Georgia, was established in February 2012 and served as the senior partner in the ruling Georgian Dream coalition. Despite its leading position, however, the party failed to establish itself as an ideologically consistent political union. Similar to any other post-Soviet catch-all ruling party, GDDG is an amalgamation of leftists and rightists, social conservatives and progressives, businesspeople and artists. This seemingly incompatible palette of philosophies and personalities is tightly glued together by the massive wealth and popularity of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the party founder and the Prime Minister of Georgia in 2012–2013.

Despite its weakly formulated ideological platform, the party has effectively mobilized its supporters and won a comfortable majority. Three main reasons contributed to GDDG's electoral success:

First and foremost, this had to do with the incumbency advantage. With power come financial resources, guaranteed media coverage and administrative instruments. GDDG has effectively employed all three. The party was particularly successful in securing donations: from June 8 to October 1, GDDG fundraised 16 million GEL, whereas UNM obtained donations worth only 1 million GEL. This, combined with Bidzina Ivanishvili's lengthy and widely broadcasted appearances in regional media outlets, and the concerted last-minute repairs of municipal roads, water supply infrastructure and gas pipes across the country, has contributed to GDDG's electoral success.

No less important was the relatively high approval rates for Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, who has been in charge of the Cabinet since December 2015, well within the honeymoon period for the standards of post-Soviet politics. Kvirikashvili's relatively short tenure as Prime Minister and his reputation as a balanced politician and an experienced manager, coupled with the recruitment of some of his personal allies on the party list, allowed him to face voters with his political capital largely intact.

This holds true for the party mandate as well. In many ways, the 2016 elections were a continuation of the 2012 parliamentary elections. Back then, when the Georgian Dream (GD) coalition unseated the incumbent President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM), the executive burden was disproportionately skewed towards the two junior members of the Georgian Dream coalition—the Free Democrats and the Republicans—despite their relatively minor parliamentary representation. Moreover, the year-long period of acrimonious cohabitation between President Saakashvili and Prime Minister Ivanishvili was widely presented as an obstruction to GD's reform agenda. As a result, for most of its time in office, the party was immune to political responsibility for the government's policy failures, which allowed party leaders to appeal for a fresh political mandate four years after its inauguration.

Last but not least, the 2016 parliamentary elections were as much about the GDDG as they were about the United National Movement and, most notably, its leader and the governor of Ukraine's Odessa region, Mikheil Saakashvili. Things seemed particularly optimistic for UNM at the beginning of the electoral campaign. The polls had consistently predicted a tight race between the leading parties: in the International Republican Institute's March opinion survey, the difference

between GDDG and UNM was just one percent, and in National Democratic Institute's August opinion survey, the difference stood at four percent. However, closer to elections, the party suffered sustained attacks by the government. The government's constant accusations of UNM-planned destabilization, coupled with Saakashvili's vows to return to Georgia after the elections, has catered to the fears of ruling party supporters and won the vote of the undecided electorate, despite the latter's overall disapproval of GDDG's performance.

However, few would have predicted the gap to be that wide, let alone that the ruling party would end up so close to securing a supermajority. Thus, when the early results showed GDDG in a decisive lead, UNM leaders and supporters gathered in front of the Central Election Commission and accused the administration of manipulative vote tabulation.

An intra-party crisis ensued, with Mikheil Saakashvili questioning the overall legitimacy of elections and calling for a boycott of the results, with most Tbilisi-based party leaders preferring to enter Parliament and the majoritarian runoffs. Saakashvili lost the debate, and the party opted against the boycott, except in Zugdidi, where UNM's candidate and Mikheil Saakashvili's wife Sandra Roelofs refused to participate in the second round. UNM headed to 43 majoritarian runoffs (out of 50), hoping to mobilize the voters around the idea of preserving democracy and depriving the ruling party of a constitutional majority. UNM's performance was expectedly meager, however, with party infighting and the reluctance of other oppositional parties to endorse its candidates having minimized UNM's chances of narrowing the difference in majoritarian runoffs. It also enabled the ruling party to divert its campaign and administrative resources to battleground districts. As a result, UNM lost the majoritarian contest, even in those constituencies where their candidates had dominated in the first round.

The Alliance of Patriots, which was the third party to enter Parliament and the youngest of the three, was established in 2013 by Ivanishvili-sympathizers who broke with the Georgian Dream coalition on the grounds of their disagreement in dealing with the United National Movement. The party claims credit for obtaining and publicizing prison torture videos, which was an important contribution to UNM's defeat in the 2012 parliamentary elections, and it is still seen as the most ardent opponent to UNM and Mikheil Saakashvili. The party's populist, nationalistic and anti-immigration ideology resonates well with the country's conservative and religious segments, and its fiercely anti-UNM rhetoric accommodates the concerns of disgruntled GD voters.

Since its establishment, the party has gradually increased its electorate; in the 2014 municipal elections,

the Alliance of Patriots won an unexpected 4.72 percent of aggregate votes. This time as well, the Alliance had all it took to score big in the polls: nonstop media coverage through the party-affiliated Obieqtivi TV and radio stations, private and business donations worth as much as that of the United National Movement and the partial endorsement of Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Political and Institutional Implications

Despite some allegations of unlawful campaigning, several incidents of violence and the dubiously delayed vote-counting process, election day was mostly peaceful, the voting process was orderly and the fundamental freedoms were generally observed. With nearly all contestants honoring the results and no international organization questioning the overall legitimacy of the elections, the parliamentary polls can be considered yet another successful test of Georgia's democracy.

The political consequences are, however, worrying. The hopes for a multi-party parliament have been effectively shattered. Instead, the parliamentary elections have produced a highly polarized parliamentary configuration, where the level of political confrontation will be much more intense than during the previous four years, thus minimizing the chances for inter-party compromises. The pre-electoral expectations for a close race between GDDG and UNM appeared to have been largely overstated as well; UNM trailed far behind in the proportional contest and failed to narrow this difference in the majoritarian runoffs. UNM's poor performance in the second round reignited intra-party debate, with Mikheil Saakashvili trading accusations publicly with the Tbilisi-based party leadership and calling on a radical organizational reshuffle in the party. It remains unclear whether the party will manage to overcome the crisis and maintain its integrity.

With no institutional checks and balances and with the absence of a clear parliamentary counterweight, the GDDG government might be tempted to abuse power and leave Georgia's nascent institutional democracy in a highly vulnerable state. Some alarming suggestions have already been made, including the abolition of direct presidential elections and stalling the plans for reforming the electoral system's majoritarian component.

The liberal and moderately liberal pro-Western political parties performed particularly badly. After an unex-

pected defeat, Irakli Alasania, the leader of the Free Democrats, announced that he would be "temporarily quitting" politics. Although Alasania has claimed that the party would continue its work, several senior party officials have also left the Free Democrats. The Republican Party, once an influential member of the Georgian Dream coalition, failed to enter Parliament with just 1.55 percent of nationwide votes. Shortly after the elections, Davit Usupashvili, the leader of the Republican Party and the former Parliamentary Chairman, announced that he would be parting ways with the Republican Party and starting a new oppositional political force. Several leading party members have also left the Republican Party. It also remains unclear whether Paata Burchuladze's "State for the People" party, which won 3.45 percent, will survive the defeat.

Although much of the pro-Western group's failure had to do with their ineffective campaigning and extreme fragmentation, the election results speak to the society's growing anti-Western sentiments. The results of the elections for the 21-member Supreme Council in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, held along with the parliamentary elections, are particularly telling. Here, just like nationally, the proportional contest was dominated by GDDG and UNM, with 45 percent and 30 percent, respectively, and the third and fourth best results were scored by the two EU- and NATO-skeptics—the Democratic Movement and the Alliance of Patriots—with 5.9 percent and 5.7 percent, respectively.

With a nativist and Russia-sympathetic Alliance of Patriots in Parliament and the more progressive parties outside, it is also inevitable that the political agenda of the newly elected Parliament will be more isolationist and more socially conservative. The Western orientation will continue, however, even though the two ardently pro-Western political parties—the Free Democrats and the Republicans—will no longer be in the Cabinet. The Euro-Atlantic integration will remain GDDG's top priority, as underlined by Giorgi Kvirikashvili on numerous occasions before and after the elections. This is not to say that there will be no anti-Western sentiments in the ruling party. As in the previous Georgian Dream coalition, anti-Western voices will be present in the background, but they will remain insignificant in shaping policy.

About the Author

Tornike Zurabashvili is a researcher and analyst of international affairs and Georgian politics.