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## ISSUE 13



OCTOBER 22 - NOVEMBER 4, 2020

### TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- **Boycott of the recognition of the Parliamentary Elections**
- **Parliamentary elections and video fabrications, false claims and disinformation**
- **Anti-Western parties and their battleground in Georgia**

### RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

**Georgian Opposition Parties Refuse to Recognize the 2020 Parliamentary Election Results, Boycott the New legislature**

**2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia have concluded with the Central Election Commission (CEC) attributing 48% of all the proportional votes to the ruling Georgian Dream party (GD), followed by the biggest opposition alliance led by the United National Movement (UNM) with 27% of support.** This percentage of votes received by Bidzina Ivanishvili's GD will allow the party to govern for an unprecedented third term. However, with the results being contested by the opposition, calling the vote numbers and the election outcome manipulated, the actual political process is set to continue outside the parliament building — all of the opposition parties passing the 1% threshold have refused to recognize the election results as valid and stated they will not join the new legislature. Additionally, the opposition is unequivocal in calling for the rerun of the elections and it plans to hold mass rallies until the demands are met.

After publishing the official preliminary election [results](#) by the CEC, local independent election watchdog ISFED [presented](#) its final assessment of the voting process observations and the PVT (parallel vote tabulation) results. ISFED report talks about the violations in the CEC work and the possible manipulation: "**there was a tendency of mismatches in the summary protocols when the number of ballot papers cast exceeded the number of signatures in voters lists, which represents a violation. Additionally, at certain polling stations, the mismatch was significantly higher than individual cases. Such violations were reported at 8% of polling stations. A tendency of this scale has not been documented in the past years, and hence, this requires particular attention...The PVT analysis shows that its maximum impact on election results would be less than 4.1%.**" Additionally, the PVT results from the ISFED differed from the preliminary election results published by the CEC. While the CEC attributed 48.17% of the votes to the GD, ISFED set this number at 45.8% (with a margin of error of 0.7%).

According to the OSCE/ODIHR's initial [assessment](#) made on November 1: "**The 31 October parliamentary elections were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected. Nevertheless, pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state reduced public confidence in some aspects of the process.**" Furthermore, the US Embassy in Georgia shared the OSCE assessment and declared in a [statement](#), that "**efforts to corrupt the electoral process through voter intimidation, vote-buying, interfering with ballot secrecy, blurring of party and official activities, and violence against election observers and journalists, while not sufficient to invalidate the results, continue to mar Georgia's electoral process and are unacceptable.**" Likewise, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) made a [statement](#) on November 2, saying "**irregularities in results protocols, widespread reports of potentially intimidating behavior in or around polling stations, delays in the publication of results, and persistent perceptions of pre-election abuses of power detracted from notable improvements in the legal framework and administrative procedures for Georgia's October 31, 2020 parliamentary elections.**"

Soon after the CEC published the Precinct Election Commission (PEC) [summary protocols](#), social networks were flooded with the photos illustrating huge imbalances

between the number of people present at the polling stations and the ballot papers cast. Several politicians stated that the summary protocols do not reflect the votes received by them, some of which claimed there were fewer votes in their favor from the polling stations where their own family members voted. As reported by ISFED, after reviewing the data from just a single polling station (#97), even though 47 people voted for the majoritarian candidate Pikria Chikhradze, the summary protocol indicated the number of votes received by the candidate was zero. More than that, while 26 people voted for "Aleko Elisashvili - Citizens" party, 32 for "Girchi," 26 for "Lelo - Mamuka Khazaradze," and 39 for "Giorgi Vashadze - Strategy Aghmashenebeli," the summary protocol from this polling station has attributed to the parties just 4, 2, 6, and 9 votes respectively.

In an October 3 statement made by another key election watchdog the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), the organization called for the annulment and recount of summary protocols in 117 election precincts due to the imbalances between the number of ballots and the number of signatures in the voters' lists. According to the data from the opposition "European Georgia" party, out of the proportional summary protocols from a total of 3847 precincts, the imbalances were identified in 1175 (30.55%) of them, while the imbalances in majoritarian summary protocols were found in 2007 (52.17%) precincts.

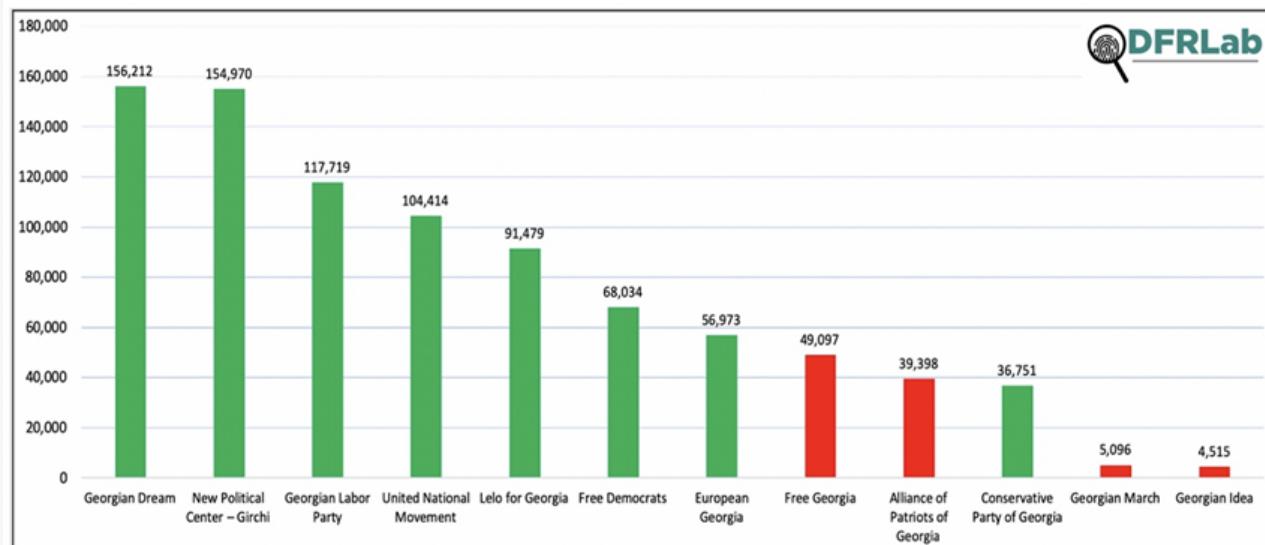
On October 4, **major Georgian NGOs published a joint assessment of the 2020 parliamentary elections, declaring "the Georgian government has failed to ensure the elections adhere to democratic standards," with the pre-election period being "characterized by an unprecedented use of administrative resources by the ruling party.**" Also, according to the assessment, "the ruling party did not shy away from manipulating the patriotic feelings of the citizens and, presumably for this purpose, launched the so-called 'Cartographers Case,' which led to the arrest of two, most likely innocent, people." The NGOs noted that "there was also a problem of the Central Commission's delay in announcing the primary election results, about seven hours after polling stations closed, which should be seen as a deterioration in established practice over the past eight years." The organizations underscored that "the 2020 parliamentary elections were the least democratic and free among the elections held under the Georgian Dream government," and that the elections marked by "a low degree of democracy, would be detrimental to the stable development of our country and its international reputation."

**A mass protest demanding the fresh parliamentary elections, the resignation of CEC's Tamar Zhvania, and releasing the political prisoners were held on November 8.** The opposition had given time to the ruling party until 8 PM, however after the government denied stepping back, thousands of Georgians gathered in front of the parliament building to peacefully protest what they believed was a rigged election, rallied towards the CEC building to continue their protest, marching about 10 km from the Rustaveli Ave. Once initially a relatively small number of people reached the CEC building, heavily guarded by the police and special forces, the riot police deployed water cannons. The human rights watchdogs and the public defender Nino Lomjaria have called this action being against the law, as the police have used the force without a prior loud warning. According to Lomjaria even after issuing a

warning, "as long as the rally remains within the law", the police are not allowed to use force. Several hours later, at 1 AM the police again deployed the water cannons, this time for about 10 minutes. The [reports](#) included the police using tear gas too, which was later denied by the Interior Ministry. As a result of the violent dispersal, protesters as well as several journalists working at the scene were injured. Considering the increased number of Covid-19 infection cases and the harsh climate conditions, the use of water cannons seemed to be unnecessary and unproportional. Shortly after the use of water cannons after midnight, making a large proportion of protesters susceptible to catching a cold and sustaining injuries, the opposition parties have decided to continue the protests the next day at 6 PM. It should be noted that on November 7 the government reintroduced Covid related [curfew](#), restricting citizens in 7 major Georgian cities to be outside from 10 PM to 5 AM.

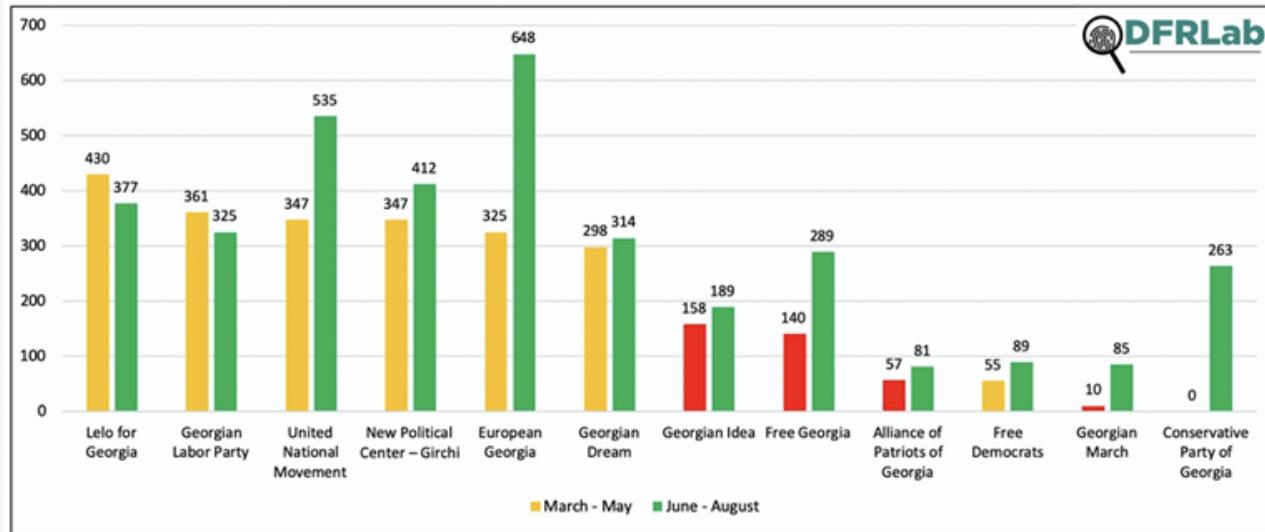
## Anti-Western parties are losing the social media battle in Georgia

Ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia, pro-Western opposition parties were more active on Facebook, had bigger audiences, and spent more resources on political advertisements compared to anti-Western political parties. The DFLab compared the performance of four anti-Western parties with the performance of other main political parties running for the elections. We compared the number of followers of each of the selected Facebook pages and found that pro-Western parties had a much larger combined audience than anti-Western parties. The relatively smaller size of these audiences may indicate that Facebook users do not find their content compelling, or that the pages do not invest that much in social media campaigning.



The DFLab also examined how active **Georgian political parties have become during the pre-election period and how it is reflected in the use of social media for political campaigning**. To that end, the DFLab compared posting activity during two time periods — from March through May 2020 and from June through August 2020. CrowdTangle analysis showed that the majority of parties increased their posting activity on Facebook. **Georgian March has increased its post-activity more**

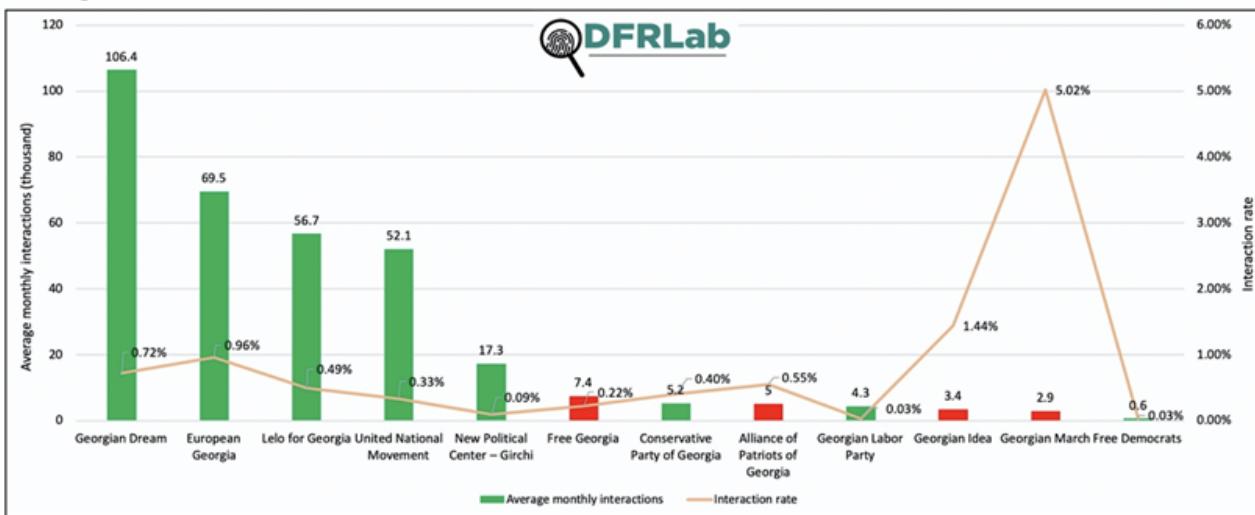
**than eightfold during two observation windows, but it still posted the smallest number of posts among all political parties. The main pro-European opposition parties, such as United National Movement and European Georgia, also intensified posting content on their Facebook pages, with the latter posting the highest number of posts in total during both observation windows.**



Although some of the political parties have large audiences, user engagement varied significantly across the pages. For example, New Political center — Girchi has the second largest audience with nearly 155,000 followers, but pages with smaller audiences garnered more engagements. All 12 pages combined garnered over 330,000 interactions from March until the end of August 2020. Georgian March, Georgian Idea, Free Georgia and Alliance of Patriots of Georgia together only garnered slightly more than 5.5 percent of total interactions.

The DFRLab also looked at [interaction rates](#) for each page, which is calculated by dividing the total number of interactions per post (e.g. reactions, comments, shares) by page likes at the time of posting. Two of the anti-Western parties, Georgian March and Georgian Idea, had the highest interaction rates at 5.02 and 1.44 percent respectively. This indicates that although they have fewer followers than other parties, the level of engagement by their audiences was higher in comparison to other parties.

Read the full article [here](#).



## MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

**Fake quote of Georgian Opposition Party Leader.** On October 20, a Facebook page “მეცაბშეთა ლიგა” (League of Merchants) published an alleged quote by Grigol Gegelia, the majoritarian candidate of the Lelo party in Rustavi. The quote supported same-sex marriage and the shared post came with a comment: “Voice of gay merchants in the Parliament.” In fact, Gegelia and his Party oppose freedom of expression for the LGBTQ+ community and legislative guarantees for same-sex marriage. Grigol Gegelia confirmed with Myth Detector that the quote was falsified and that he is against same-sex marriage. The page that disseminated the fake quote aimed at influencing the homophobic part of the public.

**Fake quotation of President of Georgia.** On October 23, a 2018 post by Facebook user Sofo Kemularia was disseminated on the social network. The post depicts the photo of Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili with the following caption written on it: “I hate poor Georgians the most. S. Zurabishvili.” A similar quote of the Georgian president cannot be found through open sources. Moreover, the post doesn’t indicate the source, date, or other details that would verify the existence of such a sentence. The post was disseminated by trolls and Facebook accounts that support the Opposition party of the United National Movement.

**Video Fabrication of Georgia’s Ruling Party Chairman.** On October 21, a video was disseminated on the Facebook page “ქოცების დასაცინი ოფიციალური სააგენტო” (Official Agency for Ridiculing Georgian Dream), in which Bidzina Ivanishvili, the chairman of Georgian Dream Party, states “In my eyes, people from Adjara are dimwits or something.” Myth Detector revealed that that the video is a fabrication and Bidzina Ivanishvili used the word "dimwits" referring to the type of society that can develop from watching "low quality" TV shows and programs. The video was published in 2019 as well, before the Khulo Mayoral Election, and was clearly a part of a pre-election counter-campaign.

**Linking Bank robbery to UNM.** On October 21, 2020, a gunman broke into the Bank of Georgia building in the western Georgian city of Zugdidi and took people hostage, demanding a ransom. One of the hostages, Irakli Kvaratskhelia, had been a member of the Georgian Opposition party, the United National Movement. There was a Facebook campaign launched amid ongoing police operation to link the robbery to the UNM, claiming that the incident aimed at destabilizing the situation in the country. Myth Detector has identified 17 pro-governmental and anti-opposition Facebook accounts and media outlets, as well as 4 antiliberal and pro-Russian accounts spreading the messages with identical content. They published a total of 13 sponsored posts. Myth Detector also identified two opposition pages, both of which tried to link the Zugdidi incident to the government.

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**A photoshopped screenshot used to falsely claim that opposition media deceives people.** A Facebook post by Travel Georgia claimed that it exposed Mtavari TV as a major opposition channel that used a photo from the Oklahoma robbery to mislead the public and amplify the criminal situation in the country. In fact, the photo from the post author is photoshopped with the Mtavari TV's logo and caption. Mtavari TV did not use this photo in its stories and news. An authentic story by Mtavari TV depicts a criminal case from Georgia. The spread of photo manipulation is aimed at discrediting the opposition media during the pre-election period.

## NAMING AND SHAMING

### Irakli Kobakhidze's pre-election accusations against the opposition

On October 26, several days before the parliamentary elections, former Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia and the "Georgian Dream" leader, Irakli Kobakhidze, held a briefing where he accused the opposition of spreading disinformation about the ruling party through the use of different programs and tools, such as deepfakes. "We have information that members of the radical opposition are preparing materials using programs such as Deepfake. We remind you that it is even possible to falsify human video images through such programs. We do not have detailed information about this. We only have information that they are preparing certain materials with the use of this program. Such materials can be posted on social networks on the eve of the election or election day, and the voters should pay special attention to it," Kobakhidze mentioned during the briefing. He also highlighted that his opponent politicians and their media outlets are obsessed with extremist intentions while dispersing fake news about the increased crime rate in Georgia.

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### Saakashvili's encouragement for mass mobilization and the neglecting of the pandemic risks

While the number of Covid-infected people is increasing day by day, the United National Movement continues to hold protests in different cities of Georgia. According to their leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, his party is ready for the mass

mobilization for the elections, and their preparatory actions include the demonstrations taking place all over Georgia. He criticizes the ruling party for failing to introduce effective Covid measures, while he himself neglects the growing number of Covid cases in Georgia and encourages people to join their demonstrations. "Ivanishvili will falsely think that he will be able to rig the elections through Covid, and that everyone will calmly wait and watch it from home. We are ready for mass mobilization, and the preparatory stages of this mobilization are our further actions. Georgia needs a victory, and nothing can stop this victory! Let's take care of each other and take care of the country!" – Saakashvili [mentioned](#) on his Facebook page.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS)** published the July-August issue from the series of reports called "Disinfometer," which analyses pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda spread in Georgia. The report obviates trends in anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives spread in Georgia by the Kremlin and its influence agents, and exposes the sources and scale of disinformation/propaganda in the Georgian online ecosystem. The [report](#) singles out strategic narratives and messages about various topics, for instance regarding the EU, NATO, the US, etc. The full report is available [here](#).

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**Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) — Rondeli Foundation** published the fourth issue of China's Activities in the South Caucasus. The report covers recent political developments and economic relations between China and the South Caucasus states. The full document is available [here](#).

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On October 29, **Civic IDEA**, together with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, organized the second webinar on War and Peace issues in the South Caucasus and the costs of war, featuring experts from countries involved as well as international organizations dealing with the issue. The participants discussed the current situation in the region, the involvement of different international and state actors in the conflict, and the long-term consequences of the ongoing Nagorno Karabakh dispute for the Caucasian region.

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**MDF** has organized a global event "Hacking the Fake News" together with ForSet, in partnership with Bellingcat and Facebook, with financial support from Zinc Network and community partner Digital Communication Network. Global Hackathon announced 3 winning teams will receive \$3,000 as a prize for their projects.

**MDF** published the annual report of Financial Transparency of Media. It includes data from 2019 and explores the declared revenues of broadcast media on the one hand and the practice of allocating budgetary funds for advertising and dissemination of

information in media outlets on the other. Check out the findings on the following [link](#).

**Online platform [On.ge](#)** became the media partner of Georgian Watch Briefing. On.ge has years of experience in covering disinformation/propaganda related issue. The platform will gather all GWB issues in one space to make it easily accessible for the readers.

See all published GWB issues [here](#).

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