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RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Municipal Elections in Georgia; Ex-President Saakashvili arrested

On **October 2, 2021**, Georgia held its municipal elections, regarded by the **opposition as a referendum for the snap parliamentary elections**. According to the April 19 [agreement](#), mediated by Chales Michel, which urged the opposition to return to parliament after months of boycott following the disputed 2020 parliamentary elections: "...early parliamentary elections shall be called in 2022 if the

Georgian Dream (GD) party receives less than 43% of valid proportional votes in the October 2021 local self-government elections". In the month of July, the ruling GD party abandoned the EU-brokered deal, with the party leader Irakli Kobakhidze claiming it "served its mission and exhausted itself". However, despite GD's withdrawal from the April 19 agreement, the opposition continued with the October 2 municipal elections as a referendum and centered their pre-election campaign around the message of not allowing the GD to receive 43% of the votes.

However, the overall proportional **results** of the highly contested **municipal elections turned out to be successful for the GD, as they managed to garner 46.7% of the total votes, compared to 30.7% support of the opposition front-runner United National Movement (UNM)**. However, the GD failed to win the Mayoral elections in the first round in major cities, including the capital Tbilisi, and run-offs are expected in 20 municipalities. GD even lost its majority in five municipal assemblies (including in the large cities of Batumi, Zugdidi and Rustavi) in the first round of the elections. In the capital Tbilisi, incumbent mayor Kakha Kaladze won 45% of the votes, while the chairman of the opposition UNM, Nika Melia, received 34%. With **no** candidate winning more than 50%, **Tbilisi will hold a second round of elections on October 30**.

The OSCE/ODIHR **published** preliminary findings regarding the elections and noted that Georgian municipal elections were "generally well-administered, held against the backdrop of a protracted political crisis and characterised by hardened polarisation", and technical aspects were managed efficiently. In terms of the pre-election campaign, OSCE/ODIHR stated that the parties were able "to campaign freely in a competitive environment", however according to the OSCE/ODIHR, **the campaign period was "marred by wide-spread and consistent allegations of intimidation, vote-buying, pressure on candidates and voters, and an unlevel playing field"**; also, the OSCE/ODIHR underscored that a "significant imbalance in resources, insufficient oversight of campaign finances and an undue advantage of incumbency" benefited the ruling party. The OSCE/ODIHR assessed the election day as "generally calm and orderly", which "proceeded in an orderly and transparent manner", although there were "some procedural issues, particularly during counting", "pervasive misuse of citizen observers as party representatives" and some isolated violent incidents. The OSCE/ODIHR also highlighted that "groups of individuals potentially influencing voters outside some polling stations were of concern". Regarding the media ecosystem, the OSCE/ODIHR noted that it was "highly polarised and provided little analytical reporting and selective coverage" which limited voters' ability to make an informed choice, and cases of intimidation and violence against journalists were of concern. Additionally, the OSCE/ODIHR mentioned that ethnic minority issues had been generally left behind during the election campaign and that national minorities remained underrepresented.

The Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which also observed the municipal election, **assessed** the elections more or less similarly. According to the CoE, the election day was "overall calm, orderly, transparent and well organised without major shortcomings", however the political environment was very polarized and there has been an "increase in verbal aggression, hate speech and fake news on social media during the election campaign". David Eray, head of the delegation of the CoE concluded that "this polarisation had a paralysing effect on local democracy which, in fact, has been taken hostage by the overall national political

situation. Against this background, this poll was a missed opportunity for local democracy in Georgia". He also voiced criticism about the efficiency of new regulations aimed at increasing the number of women on candidate lists.

The major local CSOs and election watchdogs the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), and Transparency International Georgia issued preliminary reports ([TI report](#), [GYLA report](#), [ISFED report](#)) outlining the procedural irregularities and violations inside and outside the polling stations. Violations of the secrecy of the ballot, tracking of voters by unauthorized persons, voting with improper voter identification documents, allowing a voter to cast a ballot without checking for indelible ink, and failure to follow inking procedures before voting were recorded in the polling stations, while gathering of party coordinators, voter mobilization, tracking/noting of voters and alleged vote buying were observed outside the polling stations.

The election to some extent has been overshadowed by the arrest of exiled former President Mikheil Saakashvili, founder of the UNM party. In an unexpected Facebook [post](#) early on October 1, Saakashvili said "Good morning, Georgia. From Georgia after eight years." In another [video](#) posted on his Facebook page, Saakashvili addressed the public from the coastal city Batumi and announced that he would arrive in the capital Tbilisi soon. Saakashvili called on his supporters to gather on Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi's main thoroughfare, on October 3, the day after local elections and urged the public to vote for his UNM party, or smaller "real" opposition parties, except ex-Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's "For Georgia" and other political entities that "receive money from Bidzina Ivanishvili."

The Interior Ministry, as well as the ruling GD party leaders, [denied](#) any possibility of Saakashvili being in Georgia and called the videos fake, with the Chair of the ruling party, Irakli Kobakhidze [calling](#) Saakashvili a "clown" and insisting that the video footage "was not recorded in Georgia." Though, "surprisingly", on the same night of October 1, PM Irakli Garibashvili, during the special briefing, [declared](#) that former President Mikheil Saakashvili had been arrested in Tbilisi. Two days later, on October 3, in a late-night interview with pro-government Imedi TV, PM Garibashvili talked about the arrest of former President Mikheil Saakashvili and notoriously noted that "Saakashvili better behave, otherwise, we will bring more articles [charges against him] and others [Saakashvili's allies] will share the same destiny as well."

Before and after Saakashvili's arrest, many have speculated in Georgia that the incumbent president Zourabishvili would pardon the former President. However, President Salome Zourabishvili made a [statement](#) late on October 1, saying that she will never pardon former President Saakashvili. Apart from recalling the "crimes" that Saakashvili's "regime has committed", President Zourabishvili accused him of attempts to destabilize the country amid October 2 local elections.



GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Putin promises Bzhania continuing “all possible assistance”

Russian President Vladimir Putin has [congratulated](#) the so-called “president” of occupied Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, on Abkhazia's "victory and independence day". He noted that the relationship between their “states” were developing in the spirit of alliance and strategic partnership. Putin also promised to continue providing Abkhaz friends to solve economic and social issues and to ensure “national security”.

Ethnic Georgians residing in the occupied Abkhazia forced to celebrate the fall of Sokhumi

After being deprived of the right to get an education in their mother language, ethnic Georgian children living in the Gali district in the occupied Abkhazia region [have been forced](#) to take part in the celebrations of the fall of Sokhumi.

On September 25, the [fall of Sokhumi](#) and on September 30, the so-called “[victory and independence day](#)” was celebrated in the occupied Abkhazia, while on September 27, state flags [were lowered](#) in the Tbilisi-controlled territory to mark Sokhumi Fall Day and to honor Abkhaz war victims.

The fall of Sokhumi was the final phase in the 1992-93 conflict taking place in Georgia's Abkhazia region. Prior to the fall of Sokhumi, the parties of the armed conflict reached a peace agreement several times, but Russia and the Russian-supported separatists violated the agreements. With most of the Georgian forces having already withdrawn from the conflict zone according to the July 27 Sochi agreement, Kremlin-backed separatist forces and mercenaries from Russia, in total violation of the ceasefire agreement, stormed Sokhumi and after heavy fighting overcame lightly armed Georgian forces. Capturing the city has been followed by mass killings, including the members of the local government and ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia.

Enguri bridge closed on the election day

On October 2, when municipal elections were taking place in Georgia, **Enguri bridge, the so-called checkpoint connecting with occupied Abkhazia, was closed unilaterally**. According to the locals, although citizens were able to move from Zugdidi municipality to the occupied Abkhazia, they could not cross the so-called checkpoint towards Zugdidi. The locals have said that the so-called border was closed from the morning of October 2 unilaterally by the Abkhaz side for unknown reasons.

It is worth noting that **this is not the first time that freedom of movement across the occupying line has been restricted on election day**, hindering thousands of Georgians residing in the occupied Abkhazia region to exercise their right to vote.

Three Georgian citizens detained by the occupying regime of Tskhinvali region

According to the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG), representatives of the occupation regime **detained three Georgian citizens in the occupied territory** near the village of Ergneti, Gori Municipality. The SSSG stated that from the moment of the illegal detention, the hot line was activated, the EUMM and the co-chairs of the Geneva International Discussions were informed. The SSSG claimed that the illegal detentions deteriorate the security environment along the occupying line and the everyday livelihood of the local population and placed full responsibility for the illegal detentions on the Russian Federation. Later, one of the illegally detained citizens of Georgia, being injured in the process of detention, was **freed** and transferred to Tbilisi-controlled territory.

DISINFORMATION CASES ABOUT ELECTIONS

Myth Detector has revealed 13 **Facebook accounts posing as regional media outlets but pursuing a campaign supporting or opposing a specific political party**. Four of them were created several months or weeks before the elections. See the findings [here](#).

During the election week, the **following disinformation was disseminated on social media**:

- A Facebook **page** supportive of Giorgi Gakharia, the leader of political party “for Georgia” and the former PM, published a **falsified survey attributed to Georgian Dream, according to which Gakharia’s party received the most votes**.
- An individual, apparently an UNM supporter, **disseminated** information on his Facebook account that Georgian emigrants have gathered in Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport to return home and meet Mihkeil Saakashvili, the former President of Georgia who announced he would be coming back to Georgia from Ukraine after eight years. The photo accompanying the post depicts French Olympians, not Georgian emigrants and was taken in 2016.
- A fake Facebook page imitating the Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC) disseminated two pieces of disinformation: A **fabricated** order of the CEC

chairman and a false [claim](#) that Zviad Kuprava, an affiliate of the “United National Movement” party, was protesting the purchase of 70,000 GEL vaseline by CEC.

- “ლიდერი 41” (Leader 41), an active supporter page of the ruling party Georgian Dream, [published](#) a cropped video of UNM leader Nika Melia’s speech in Dmanisi, claiming that he called on the residents of Dmanisi for violence. In fact, Melia mentioned how the ruling party uses violent means to silence opponents and there was no call for violence in his speech.

On the election day, October 2, the most prominent cases were two falsified surveys in the name of [IPSOS](#) and [Edison](#) Research. The Facebook pages that disseminated the survey results aimed at discrediting the opposition.

CHINA'S INFLUENCE

Sino-Georgian relations through David Saganelidze’s eyes

On September 21, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which is highly leveraged by China, officially announced that it would **provide the Georgian government with a USD 100 million loan, aiming to strengthen Georgia's electricity sector**. On September 24, ADB already approved a [USD 15 million loan](#) to assist Georgia in effectively implementing its vaccination programs. **Three weeks prior to the debt approval from the ADB, the Georgian government publicly [refrained from taking 75 million Euros worth of macrofinancial assistance from the European Union](#)**. According to the Prime Minister's official statement, Georgia has begun the reduction of its foreign debt, and therefore no additional aid from the EU was needed. Moreover, the CCP-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is ranked as the second creditor of Georgia after the ADB, [with borrowings of USD 184,7 billion](#). Therefore, the question remains why the Georgian government takes debt from the Asian Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank when **[their services are twice as expensive as the EU's](#)**.

According to Georgian opposition party leaders, the refusal of EU aid due to unfounded reasons and the acceptance of the Asian loan demonstrates that the **Georgian ruling party aims to thwart [the country's Euro-Atlantic path](#)**. In any possible case, we face a reality where, **in addition to rendering major infrastructure projects to Chinese companies, the PRC has also indirectly become Georgia's main creditor**. Moreover, according to the following year’s budget document, the Georgian government plans to take out a new foreign debt [of GEL 3.1 billion](#) by 2022, most of which will be provided by the ADB. The occasion contradicts the previous statement concerning the reduction of Georgia’s foreign debt.

Besides being a Head of the Partnership Fund, over the years Mr. **Saganelidze has established a close partnership with a controversial Georgian businessman involved in various corruption schemes, Ivane Chkhartishvili**. During the latter’s ministerial career, Saganelidze made his fortune in business. Moreover, the Partnership Fund he heads, **[“brought CEFC and other Chinese companies to Georgia and assisted them in their local endeavors”](#)**.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

On September 29, **Civic IDEA** published [China Watch Report N7](#), which deals with misconduct related to the activities of the Chinese company “China Road and Bridge Corporation” (CRBC) in Georgia, violations related to labor rights, and shady practices in various countries worldwide. The company is collaborating with the Georgian Roads Department on two major infrastructure projects. Like other Chinese companies in Georgia, it was blacklisted by the World Bank in 2009 and was banned from participating in all World Bank-funded infrastructure projects for eight years. The mismanagement of the Chinese company in Georgia is mainly related to the violation of labor safety rules, which endangered the health of local workers. Controversial activities of China Road and Bridge Corporation are also observed in Kenya, Uganda, Kyrgyzstan, Croatia, and Ukraine. However, despite the shortcomings in other countries, the Georgian government continues to actively cooperate with the representatives of the Chinese company and sign new contracts with them.

MDF has published the Financial Transparency of Media 2020 Report that analyzes how budgetary funding influences the editorial policy of the media and illustrates which anti-western media outlets have budgetary contracts. See the findings [here](#).

MDF in the framework supported by Internews carried out a news study on Conflict reporting in Azerbaijani- and Armenian-language regional media outlets. The findings are based on daily monitoring and quantitative analysis of 20 local Azerbaijani- and Armenian-language media outlets as well as conflict-related qualitative analysis of specific Russian and Georgian-language media Facebook accounts. The study is available [here](#).

The EVC issued a Quarterly Report on the political situation in Georgia and related foreign malign influence, Issue 5. This report contains information about the major political developments that occurred in Georgia from June to August 2021. It provides a brief overview of the ongoing political impasse and outlines the role of Georgia’s Western partners in resolving it. Consequently, the quarterly report covers the following topics: violent attacks against the LGBTQ community by Kremlin-affiliated violent groups, also encouraged by the Orthodox Church of Georgia; the contested appointment of the Supreme Court judges in Georgia and the ruling GD party’s decision to abrogate the agreement mediated by the President of the European Council. Moreover, the report outlines the international response in this matter and attempts to analyze its consequences on Georgia’s EU-Georgian affairs.

On September 23 the European Values Center for Security Policy, partnered with the Center for International Private Enterprise, organized the launch of the policy report: **How should the Czech state protect companies from foreign predators? [Watch the recording here](#).**

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