

Political Climate in Georgia



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COUNTRY OVERVIEW



Photograph: DW

Politics in Georgia involve a parliamentary representative democratic republic with a multi-party system. The President of Georgia is the ceremonial head of state and the Prime Minister of Georgia is the head of government. The Prime Minister and the Government wield executive power. Legislative power is vested in both the Government and the unicameral Parliament of Georgia.

Increasing US economic and political influence in the country has long been a source of concern for neighbouring Russia, as have Georgia's aspirations to join NATO and the EU.

Tense relations with Russia have been further exacerbated by Moscow's support for the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, leading to a brief war in August 2008.

LEADERS

Ruling Party: Georgian Dream
President: Salome Zourabichvili
Prime Minister: Irakli Garibashvili

Over the past decade, the fight in Georgia between the current ruling party Georgian Dream and its predecessor, the United National Movement—and in particular between their respective leaders Bidzina Ivanishvili and Mikheil Saakashvili—has become a winner-takes-all clash. Since the parliamentary elections of October and November 2020, the standoff has become yet more intense. Freedom House noted in its 2020 Nations in Transit report that “polarization and radicalization of politics and the media space have become a new normal in Georgian political life.” More recently, observers of the 2021 municipal elections stated: “The 2 October local elections were generally well-administered but held against the backdrop of a protracted political crisis and characterized by hardened polarization.”

In 2012, Saakashvili had Ivanishvili stripped of his Georgian citizenship, the first of many moves and countermoves between the two adversaries. After Ivanishvili’s Georgian Dream defeated the UNM in 2012, and despite the seemingly peaceful transfer of power, Saakashvili’s party and its supporters found it difficult to come to terms with defeat. Georgian Dream proceeded to “restore justice” in a fashion that bordered on political persecution of the UNM leaders. Saakashvili left the country in 2013.

In Georgian Dream’s first term, polarization was not so intense. The government consisted of a broad coalition of several parties, which gave politics a more pluralistic democratic character. However, these parties split from Georgian Dream before the 2016 elections and were not elected to the next parliament. These elections were again a binary political clash between the two main parties. In 2018, Saakashvili was sentenced in absentia to imprisonment for abuse of power.

Ahead of important local elections on 2 October 2021, Saakashvili promised to return to Georgia, saying the vote was “a referendum on ousting the Georgian Dream, and Ivanishvili from power.” He kept his word. Just before the election, he entered the country secretly in the container of a sea cargo ship, in violation of the law. On 1 October it was announced that he had been arrested and sent to prison. There Saakashvili began a hunger strike.

Both leaders have a mixed legacy. Saakashvili is remembered by Georgian society as a driver of modernization of the country and its move toward the West, but at the same time as a leader who flouted human rights, personal dignity, and property rights. He repeatedly demonized his political adversaries, referring for example to those who opposed his harsh law-and-order policies as people who had been “flushed down” into oblivion. Ivanishvili initially at least corrected some of Saakashvili’s excesses, but he did not keep his promise to increase the welfare of citizens. And, just as importantly, instead of fulfilling the promise he made in 2011 “to astonish Europe with the level of democracy that I will create in Georgia,” Ivanishvili did nothing to increase confidence in the electoral and justice systems.

The almost chronic political polarization and permanent crisis plunges the population into apathy and demotivates them from participating in politics. As a result, the participatory process and faith in democratic institutions suffer. In addition, the sharp nature of the struggle for power

refrains the authorities from depoliticizing the law-enforcement institutions and ending their use for party interests. This was revealed in a recent scandal relating to the leak of alleged security-service files seeming to document widespread and long-running state surveillance of journalists, clergymen, and diplomats. This scandal has caused serious damage to Georgia's reputation in the eyes of Western partners as a democratic country and a reliable ally.

Meanwhile, the pressing problems of the socioeconomic well-being of the population, as well as the pandemic or the environment, are neglected. Another issue that receives too little attention is the rapid alienation of the population on both sides of the dividing line of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts. Due to the complexity and extremely delicate nature of the problem, a creative new approach from the entire political spectrum is needed in order to find mutual understanding and build trust. However, in the context of the existing political polarization, this cooperation is hardly possible.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

April 9 Tragedy and Georgia's Independence from the Soviet Union

On 9 April 1989, at 3:45 a.m., Tbilisi city center was awakened by the Russian military. Special forces of the Soviet troops under General Igor Rodionov, armed with sapper shovels, fired tear gas and CS gas, a chemical weapon, at crowds of peaceful protesters who gathered in Rustaveli avenue to demand independence from the Soviet empire.

21 people were reported dead, including 17 women, 183 hospitalized, about 300 people poisoned with gases, and 290 injured.

The events of 9 April known as "Tbilisi massacre," were followed by weeks of demonstrations against separatism in the Georgian Black Sea region of Abkhazia, supporting Georgian secession from the Soviet Union. The protests were led by the Independence Committee, consisting of Merab Kostava, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Giorgi Chanturia, Irakli Bathiashvili and Irakli Tsereteli, and were supported by more than 10,000 people at its peak.

The protests took place in a square in Rustaveli Avenue in front of the Parliament building, which became a platform for change hosting more mass protests that result in a massive policy change in the years since.

On 10 April Georgian population went on strike announcing a 40-day mourning period to commemorate tragic death. As a result of the events, the government of the Georgian SSR resigned.

The 9 April tragedy radicalized Georgian opposition to the Soviet power.

On 26 April 1989, it was reported that over 300,000 people gathered on a rally to mark the anniversary of the declaration of the Georgian Democratic Republic in 1918, which resulted in Georgia's incorporation in the Soviet Union.

During a session held on 17-18 November 1989, the Supreme Council of Georgian SSR officially condemned the occupation and annexation of Democratic Republic of Georgia by Soviet Russia in 1921.

On 31 March 1991, Georgia held a nationwide referendum for independence from the Soviet Union with a turnout of 90.5% of Georgians and 99% support for the referendum. On the second anniversary of Tbilisi massacre, 9 April 1991, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia proclaimed Georgian independence from the Soviet Union.

Presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, 1991-1992

Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected as a President of the Georgian Republic in the election of 26 May 1991, with 86.5% of the vote on a turnout of over 83%.

Although highly treated as father of Georgian independence, Gamsakhurdia's presidency Gamsakhurdia's brief period as the country's leader is associated with chaos and conflict. His opponents were highly critical of what they regarded as "unacceptably dictatorial behaviour", which had already been the subject of criticism even before his election as President.

As a protest against Gamsakhurdia's policies, Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua and two other senior ministers resigned on 19 August 1991. The three ministers joined the opposition, accusing Gamsakhurdia of "being a demagogue and totalitarian" and complaining about the slow pace of economic reforms. Disagreement with Gamsakhurdia's rule led to a civil war or a coup d'état in December 1991.

On 22 December 1991, armed opposition supporters launched a violent coup d'état and attacked several official buildings including the Georgian Parliament building where Gamsakhurdia was hiding in the bunker with his supporters. The civil war lasted until 6 January 1992.

On 6 January Gamsakhurdia and members of his government escaped through opposition lines, finding asylum in Chechnya, a breakaway region of Russia at the time.

The Tbilisi war resulted in the death of more than 100 people and destroyed scores of historic buildings in downtown Tbilisi, many of which were never rebuilt.

In March 1992, Gamsakhurdia was deposed and a former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze was appointed head of Georgia's new State Council.

Gamsakhurdia died in western Georgia in 1993 in circumstances that remain unclear. At the time of his death, the Georgian authorities concluded that he had committed suicide by shooting himself in the head.

RUSSIA: War in Abkhazia, 1992-1993

The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to emergence of tensions among several ethnic groups in the regions of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In September 1990, the South Ossetia declared its sovereignty within the Soviet Union, which led to Tbilisi abolishing the autonomous region of the South Ossetia and dispatching a military faction to pacify the region.

At the same time, in 1989, tensions in Abkhazia led to the “war of laws” between the legislatures of Tbilisi and of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia fostered by nationalist forces.

The ethnic tensions in Abkhazia region exploded into a 13-month war which ended in a military victory for Abkhaz separatists but a political stalemate that continues today. A full-scale war resulted in death of at least 12,000 people before the ceasefire was signed.

Following Georgia's declaration of independence in 1991, and the simultaneous abolition of Abkhazia's autonomy, the Abkhaz immediately reinstated their 1925 constitution, defining it as an independent state united with Georgia based on special union treaty and proceeded to declare their desire to leave Georgia and remain part of the Soviet Union/Russian Federation. This quickly escalated into open violence with Georgian forces taking over the Gali region in August 1992 and cutting Abkhazia off from Russia.

As a result of coup d'état in Tbilisi, the Abkhaz leadership was forced to retreat from Sukhumi but immediately regrouped and organized guerrilla-style resistance. Backed by North Caucasian, in particular Chechen, fighters, as well as Russian air support, the Abkhaz quickly recaptured most of the territory which they initially lost, with Georgian control reduced to the Khodori Gorge and Gali.

The final ceasefire was signed in May 1994 when the Moscow Agreement established a permanent ceasefire line with military exclusion zones on either side.

As a result of the war, nearly a quarter of a million ethnic Georgians fled their homes. Abkhazia declared its independence in 1999, though it remained unrecognized.

In August 1993, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 854 establishing the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG). The Russia-dominated CIS also dispatched a peacekeeping force to the region.

Presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze

Eduard Shevardnadze had spent his working life as a Communist official. He served as First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party (GPC) from 1972 to 1985, which made him the de facto leader of Georgia. As First Secretary, Shevardnadze started several economic reforms, which would spur economic growth in the republic—an uncommon occurrence in the Soviet Union because the country was experiencing a nationwide economic stagnation. Shevardnadze's anti-corruption campaign continued until he resigned from his office as First Secretary.

In 1985, Gorbachev appointed Shevardnadze as a Soviet Union's Foreign Minister.

While in office, Shevardnadze started renouncing Communism. In 1988, he was the first person to say that the clash with capitalism no longer mattered. On 20 December 1990, he resigned his office, and three months after the fall of the Soviet Union agreed to head the council governing Georgia after the coup.

Shevardnadze was appointed Speaker of the Georgian parliament in March 1992 and as speaker of parliament in November. Both posts were equivalent to the post of the president.

Shevardnadze fought tenaciously to restore order and economic prosperity, and in 1995 survived a car bomb explosion outside the parliament building, as he went to sign a new constitution that was to bring four years of civil war to an end. When the presidency was restored in November 1995, Shevardnadze was elected with 70% of the vote. He was reelected as a President in 2000 and kept office until he resigned in 2003.

When Shevardnadze assumed leadership of the country, the civil war was still ongoing, and the rule of law was still to be established. As a President, he tried to plant seeds of Georgia's economy, create a new currency, support free media and the civil society.

In the lead-up to the 2000 presidential elections, Shevardnadze was getting the unanimous support of the leading Western powers as well as of Russia and several CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries such as the Ukraine and Azerbaijan.

During his presidency, Shevardnadze played a key role in Georgia's relations with Germany. As the Soviet foreign minister in 1989, he was instrumental in achieving the reunification of Germany. Since then, he has been a close friend of Hans-Dietrich Genscher, his German counterpart at the time. In support of Shevardnadze's presidency, Genscher arranged for the European Commission to grant financial aid to Shevardnadze. Since then, Germany has become the second largest international donor of development aid to Georgia.

Shevardnadze was also receiving substantial support from the US and was building the relationship with NATO, planning for Georgia to join the Alliance by 2005.

Although he was twice elected president, Shevardnadze's popularity declined.

Shevardnadze's economic policies legated from the communist past, with oligarchs and rent seekers managing to optimize their personal benefits and to stop further reforms. Georgia was fueled with political unrest and civil war, extreme insecurity, ineffectiveness of core state institutions, including the police and the tax authorities, and one of the highest rates of corruption in the world. The international financial institutions lost confidence in Georgia's political leaders and in their ability to conduct efficient economic reforms. Economic breakdown together with high levels of corruption as well as unresolved conflicts in Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, fueled public resentment towards Shevardnadze.

On 23 November 2003, after the Rose Revolution street protests about disputed election results, Eduard Shevardnadze was forced to resign, amid allegations of electoral corruption.

Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili and the Rose Revolution

In November 2003, tens of thousands of Georgians took to the streets to protest against the flawed results of a parliamentary election. The demonstrators demanded the resignation of Eduard Shevardnadze, a man who had ruled Georgia for more than 30 years in total, as its Soviet-era Communist boss and its longest-serving post-independence president.

On 2 November 2003, Georgia held elections for the Georgian Parliament. These elections were seen as crucial for laying the groundwork for the 2005 presidential election, during which Georgians hoped to elect someone who could move the country forward. It was suspected that Shevardnadze rigged the elections in his party's favor. Following the announcement of the election results in the party's favour, non-violent protests broke out on 3 November 2003.

On the 4th of November, Georgians held large rallies in protest of the election results. Saakashvili, leader of the United National Movement (UNM), called upon all opposition forces to "join up." Other rallies were planned to occur in the towns of Zugdidi, Telavi, and Gori. And opposition groups held another set of large rallies on the 8 November. Two days later, thousands more gathered for a protest rally outside the parliamentary building where Shevardnadze had been meeting with leaders of the opposition.

The largest demonstration occurred on the 14 November when between 20,000 and 30,000 took to the streets and gathered around the presidential building, chanting and dancing. In response to the massive unrest, Shevardnadze went on television and made a call for peace, warning that a civil war could be a possibility.

Shevardnadze told protesters they risked causing a civil war and deployed hundreds of soldiers on the streets of Tbilisi. At that point, student demonstrators decided to give red roses to the soldiers. Many soldiers laid down their guns. On 23 November Mikheil Saakashvili, one of the leaders of the revolution together with Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze, stormed into the Georgian parliament with a bunch of roses in his hands demanding resignation of Shevardnadze.

The final protest occurred on the 24th of November when protesters stormed the new session of parliament. Protesters carried red roses as they interrupted the parliamentary session. Saakashvili raised his rose in the air shouting "Resign!" in the face of the illegitimate leader, presenting it to him. The breach caused bodyguards of the president to evacuate him. It also prompted Russian politicians to set up a meeting with Shevardnadze regime and the opposition. Following the meeting, Shevardnadze announced his resignation.

In the upcoming weeks, presidential and parliamentary elections were held in which Saakashvili's party won the majority. Throughout the entire campaign, demonstrators remained nonviolent.

Georgia's independent media, particularly Rustavi-2, supported the Rose Revolution by providing a forum for opposition parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) critical of the government. The channel also co-funded and broadcasted exit polls that contradicted the official election results.

The Saakashvili-led Rose Revolution has been described by the White House as one of the most powerful movements in the modern history that has inspired others to seek freedom.

In the 4 January 2004, elections, Saakashvili won 96 % of the vote. From the very beginning of his presidency, Mikheil Saakashvili put the focus on the construction of a modern market economy with Western standards. He immediately sought solutions for Georgia's manifold problems by appointing a new slate of government officials and attacking endemic corruption.

Anti-Corruption Measures

Before the revolution of November 2003, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze had been unsuccessful in curbing the rapid growth of corruption throughout Georgian society and the political process. Corruption in Georgia under the leadership of Shevardnadze was so widespread it affected life on nearly every level. Despite very strong laws against corruption, little was done to enforce them.

Saakashvili started out his presidency with strong words. "We need to introduce in the parliament very drastic anti-corruption legislation that would give vast powers to a new elite, small, honest investigative unit that would really tackle high-level corruption," he said in January 2004. During his inauguration speech, he pressed, "We must root out corruption. As far as I am concerned, every corrupt official is a traitor who betrays the national interest." Many hoped the difference would be Saakashvili's young age, 36, and the Western influence brought through his education in the United States.

Saakashvili systematically fired politicians, public officials, and police officers suspected of corruption and significantly raised the salaries of state employees to the point where they could depend on their salaries rather than bribes for a living. Many oligarchs who had dominated the economy were arrested, with most agreeing to pay massive fines into the state budget in

exchange for their freedom. Saakashvili reformed the economy by cutting red tape which had made business difficult, courting foreign investment, simplifying the tax code, launching a privatization campaign, and tackling widespread tax evasion. Due to the establishment of a functioning taxation and customs infrastructure, the state budget increased by 300% within three years.

As a result, the rate of corruption in the country was drastically reduced and the business environment was improved significantly. The economy began growing and the standard of living rose. Georgia's ranking in the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International improved dramatically from rank 133 in 2004 to 67 in 2008 and further to 51 in 2012, surpassing several EU countries. The World Bank named Georgia as the leading economic reformer in the world, and the country ranked 8th in terms of ease of doing business- while most of the country's neighbours are ranked somewhere in the hundreds.

Saakashvili also reformed education, police, and health care systems. His government introduced a common entrance exam, replacing the bribe-based system with a university spot costing up to \$50,000 in 2003 to a merit-based one with improved quality. The government privatized almost all public hospitals and clinics, and the insurance system was deregulated, with private insurance companies able to offer coverage.

Georgia's Western Direction

Although Saakashvili was strongly pro-Western and intended to seek Georgian membership of NATO and the European Union, he had also spoken of the importance of better relations with Russia.

Saakashvili saw NATO as a premise of stability for Georgia and offered an intensified dialogue with the *de facto* Abkhaz and Ossetian authorities. Until the 2008 South Ossetia war, a diplomatic solution was thought to be possible. Saakashvili's administration doubled the number of its troops in Iraq, making Georgia one of the biggest supporters of Coalition Forces, also keeping its troops in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Saakashvili believed that the long-term priority for the country was to advance its membership in the European Community and strengthen relationship with the United States, which led to the visit of George W. Bush on 10 May 2005 to Tbilisi. During the speech in Tbilisi Freedom Square, Vladimir Arutyunian attempted an assassination on the presidents. Arutyunian threw a live hand grenade at where Saakashvili and Bush were sitting, which landed in the crowd about 20 metres (65 ft) from the podium after hitting a girl and did not detonate.

On 2 November 2007, Tbilisi faced a new series of protests of 40,000–50,000 rallying in downtown Tbilisi. People protested the allegedly corrupt government of president Mikheil Saakashvili, triggered by detention of Georgian politician Irakli Okruashvili on charges of extortion, money laundering, and abuse of office during his tenure as defense minister of the country.

On 8 November 2007, President Saakashvili announced a compromise solution to hold an early presidential election for 5 January 2008. He also proposed to hold a referendum in parallel to snap presidential elections about when to hold parliamentary polls – in spring as pushed for by the opposition parties, or in late 2008.

Saakashvili subsequently won the presidential election held on 5 January 2008, but by a significantly smaller majority than he had in 2004. Though opposition groups contested the election as flawed, its results were supported by international monitors, and Saakashvili began his second term as president on 20 January. Parliamentary elections were held in late May 2008, with Saakashvili's UNM winning a majority of the seats.

RUSSIA: War in South Ossetia in 2008

In April of 2008, NATO members at a summit in Bucharest, Romania, defer the decision on Georgia and Ukraine's admittance until December 2008. With Georgia on the verge of joining NATO, but not yet subject to the organization's collective defense agreement, Russia saw an opportunity to rein in its neighbor and demonstrate its military strength in the region.

On 8 August 2008, after months of back-and-forth accusations and provocations between the two sides, and a series of clashes between South Ossetian militia and Georgian military troops, Sakaashvili ordered his troops to capture the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali. Russia swiftly responded by moving its troops to the border and conducting air strikes on Georgian positions in South Ossetia as well as Abkhazia.

With the United States, Great Britain and NATO calling for a ceasefire, the conflict continued for five days, as Russia quickly took control of Tskhinvali and rolled its tanks and troops through Ossetia into Georgia, stopping only about 30 miles from Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. Beyond diplomatic efforts and humanitarian aid, the international community did little to stop the conflict.

A cease-fire on 12 August 2008, ended the war. According to [an official EU fact-finding report in 2009](#), nearly 850 people were killed during the five-day conflict, while some 35,000 Georgians were left homeless.

The pressure against Saakashvili intensified in 2009, when the opposition launched mass demonstrations against Saakashvili's rule. On 5 May 2009, Georgian police said large-scale disorders were planned in Georgia.

On 2 October 2012, Saakashvili admitted defeat in Georgia's parliamentary election against Bidzina Ivanishvili in the election the day before. He was barred from seeking a third term in the 2013 presidential election. Saakashvili left Georgia shortly after the election.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, Prime-Minister

The only billionaire in Georgia, as of 2014, Ivanishvili was worth \$5.2 billion (currently \$4.8B),

equivalent to 32% of his country's GDP. He has bankrolled universities, medical clinics, theaters, ski resorts, welfare programs, national parks, political parties and even police forces. He ruled Georgia.

In preparation for the 2012 parliamentary elections, Georgia implemented constitutional reforms to switch to a parliamentary democracy, moving executive powers from the President to the Prime Minister.^[129] The transition was set to start with the October 2012 parliamentary elections and to be completed with the 2013 presidential elections.

In April 2012, Ivanishvili established the Georgian Dream–Democratic Georgia party with the intention to challenge the ruling United National Movement in the parliamentary election scheduled for October 2012. The Georgian Dream coalition was composed of the Republican Party of Georgia, Our Georgia – Free Democrats, the National Forum, the Conservative Party of Georgia and the Industry Will Save Georgia party.

Ivanishvili was elected prime minister of Georgia on 25 October 2012.

Due to the incomplete transition to parliamentary democracy, a year of uneasy cohabitation between rivals Ivanishvili and Saakashvili followed until the October 2013 presidential elections.

During his period as Georgian prime minister, Ivanishvili pushed the state Universal Healthcare Program (making emergency surgeries and childbirth free of charge), initiated the reform of the system of self-governance, and developed the project on rescuing the villages. Yet, Bidzina's year in power has been severely criticized and accused to be disastrous politically, economically and diplomatically, in terms of relations with Russia.

In October 2013, Giorgi Margvelashvili, a candidate of the Georgian Dream party, won the presidential election. Margvelashvili succeeded president Mikheil Saakashvili, who had served the maximum of two terms since coming to power after the bloodless 2003 "Rose Revolution". However, the new constitution made the role of president largely ceremonial. With the completed transfer of power, Prime Minister Ivanishvili stepped aside and named one of his close business associates as next Prime Minister.

Ivanishvili left the post of prime minister on November 20, 2013, on the basis of an earlier statement and returned to the civil sector. Ivanishvili has since been called the informal leader of Georgia, arranging political reappointments from behind the scenes. In 2018, he returned to politics and was elected as the chairman of the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia party.

Political developments in 2016 - 2020

In October 2016, the ruling party Georgian Dream won the parliamentary elections with 48.61 percent of the vote while the opposition United National Movement (UNM) gained 27.04 percent of the vote. As result of the mixed proportional-majoritarian system, with a threshold of 5% for the proportional vote and redefined majoritarian districts, only four parties entered parliament, with the Georgian Dream party gaining a constitutional majority of 77% (+36 seats). This

electoral imbalance became a key issue of political and civil society strife in the following years.

Salome Zurbishvili won the 2018 presidential election in two rounds, becoming the first woman in Georgia to hold the office in full capacity after Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze held the office as female interim President twice, in 2003 and 2007. Zurbishvili was backed by the ruling Georgian Dream party. It was the last direct election of a Georgian president, as additional constitutional reforms removed the popular vote.

On 31 October 2020, the ruling Georgian Dream again led by Bidzina Ivanishvili secured over 48% of votes in the parliamentary election under a different electoral system. 120 parliamentary seats were elected through proportional vote while 30 seats were elected through single mandate majoritarian constituencies. The threshold for the proportional vote was lowered to 1%, which resulted in 9 parties being represented in parliament. As largest faction, having secured 90 out of 150 seats, Georgian Dream formed the country's next government and continued to govern alone. The opposition made accusations of fraud, which the Georgian Dream denied. Thousands of people gathered outside the Central Election Commission to demand a new vote, leading to a new political crisis.

Gavrilov's Night

On 20 June 2019, the Deputy of Russian State Duma representing a Communist Party, Sergei Gavrilov, paid a visit to Georgia through the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy. To deliver his speech, he sat in a chair reserved by protocol for the Head of Parliament and spoke in Russian language extolling the Orthodox brotherhood of Georgia and Russia. In the past, Gavrilov had voted in favor of the independence of Abkhazia.

Gavrilov's actions were seen by the Georgian public as denigrating Georgian sovereignty. The opposition, mainly members of the European Georgia and United National Movement, blocked the speaker and called for protests that demanded the government's resignation. As night fell, protests escalated into clashes between riot police and a group of protesters near the parliament entrance. During the midnight hours, Georgian law enforcement used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse protesters. Approximately 240 demonstrators were injured, and 305 protesters were arrested. At least two people experienced eye injuries and loss of vision due to rubber bullets. The government accused protesters of attempting to storm the parliament building, which will later result the arrest of the united opposition and UNM leader - Nika Melia.

Protests continued throughout the next days, demanding the resignation of government officials responsible for police actions, including the MIA of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia, and introduction of fully proportional election system instead of the existing semi-proportional. Protests calmed down after on June 24 the head of the ruling Georgian Dream Party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, announced a change to the electoral system.

Major protests renewed on 13 November after the Georgian Dream failed the promised electoral reform. On 18 November, 20,000 people gathered in the center of Tbilisi demanding the resignation of government. Protesters blocked entrance to parliament and prevented legislative session from taking place. Riot police dispersed protests using water cannon, resulting in injury of 4 protesters and 2 policemen. On 25 November police had to use water cannon again in order to clear the parliament entrance, leaving 3 protesters heavily injured.

These protests of 2019-2020 are known as “Gavrilov's Night” or “Protests in Georgia”, calling for fresh elections and change of government.

Following the protests of 20-21 June 2019, Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgia's Chairman of Parliament, announced his resignation. After mass demonstrations on 24 June in Tbilisi, the head of the ruling Georgian Dream Party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, announced a change to the electoral system from a mixed to proportional representation for the 2020 elections and lowering the vote barrier for parties.

On 26 June, Nika Melia, an opposition leader and United National Movement MP was charged with organizing, managing, or participating in group violence during the protests. The Georgian parliament suspended his parliamentary immunity, allowing his detention if necessary. On 28 June he was released on bail. Court decision banned Melia from leaving home without previously informing law enforcers, making public statements in public areas and communicating with witnesses. His passport was confiscated, and he was obliged to wear an electronic bracelet to be monitored.

On 4 July Prosecutor's Office of Georgia added the charge of attempted coup to investigation into 20 June protests.

After the failure of the proposed electoral amendments to be passed on 13 November 2019, the ruling party and the opposition held several rounds of talks, and on 8 March 2020, a “memorandum of understanding” was signed, marking achievement of consensus over electoral reform. The amendments were adopted by the Georgian Parliament on 29 June 2020, with 117 out of 142 members voting in support for the reforms. The new electoral law stipulated, that 120 deputies would be elected via proportional representation, while another 30 would be elected from single-member constituencies. The constituencies would be drawn according to the instructions given by the Venice Commission, and the Georgian judiciary. For proportional representation seats, the electoral threshold was fixed at 1%. No party could obtain majority seats without getting at least 40% of votes from the electorate.

Crisis of Proportional Elections in 2020

The political crisis of 2019 predictably spilt over into the hotly contested 31 October Parliamentary Elections. But rather than offering the solution, that date proved not the resolution – instead, the contested election outcome has deepened polarization and led the country into a deadlock.

Following the termination of the contract with the consortium, Georgia received an unprecedented amount of letters of concern from the U.S. and the EU lawmakers, who worried about the state of the rule of law and economic freedoms in the country. The politics surrounding the Anaklia Port Project, the dispute with Texan-based Frontera Resources, allegedly politically motivated imprisonment of Gigi Ugulava, former Tbilisi Mayor, the failure to pass the electoral reforms in 2019, an alleged increase of the Russian influence in Georgian governance – these were some of the key charges brought up in these missives.

Foreign-Facilitated Talks Vol. 1 – March 8 Deal, Passing Electoral Reforms

When the ruling Georgian Dream backtracked on the promise to transition to the fully proportional electoral system, a political crisis ensued. In 2020, foreign partners facilitated four rounds of talks between the Georgian Dream and the opposition – with no results. On 10 February, opposition parties quit the table after the jailing of Gigi Ugulava, European Georgia leader. But the fifth round convened two weeks later, owing to EU and U.S. Ambassadors' efforts broke the mold. On 8 March, at the residence of the newly minted U.S. Ambassador Kelly Dignan (she arrived in Tbilisi in late January), the ruling and the opposition parties reached an agreement. It said that of 150 MPs, 120 would be elected through proportional-party lists, and 30 through the majoritarian districts, a significant improvement – in opposition's mind – from earlier, 77/73 ratio. The electoral threshold was lowered to 1% of the votes.

Yet, another component of the agreement, which the opposition claimed envisaged releasing alleged political prisoners, Gigi Ugulava, Irakli Okruashvili, and Giorgi Rurua, led to controversy. The ruling party denied any agreement, even though the first two left the prison. In the end, the Georgian Parliament passed the reforms amid a boycott by the United National Movement and European Georgia parties. The acrimony this generated came to haunt Georgia's politics several months later.

Parliamentary elections were held in Georgia on 31 October and 21 November 2020 to elect the 150 members of Parliament. The ruling Georgian Dream party led by Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia won re-election for a third term in office, making it the first party in Georgian history to do so. The election also saw a record number of opposition parties elected to parliament.

The opposition boycotted the second round of the elections and called on voters to abstain; turnout in the second round was subsequently only 26.29%.

The United States embassy in Georgia, commenting on the OSCE statement, said: *"We call on all parties to address these deficiencies in advance of the second round and in future elections. These 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."*

Eight opposition parties stated that they would not attend parliamentary sittings. On 3 November 2020, all Georgian opposition parties signed a joint statement renouncing their seats in the parliament until the parliamentary elections (which they consider null and void) are repeated.

The joint statement was signed by parties who have passed the threshold gaining seats in the parliament, as well as those whose result was below 1 percent. The document was signed by the United National Movement, European Georgia, Lelo, Strategy Agmashenebeli, Alliance of Patriots, Citizens, Labor Party, Republican Party, Law and Justice, European Democrats, United Georgia, Tribune, Victorious Georgia, For Justice, Free Democrats, Freedom, Free Georgia, Christian Democratic Movement.

Leaders of the opposition parties called in the statement for cancellation of election results and holding repeat elections and elimination of systematic electoral violations that led to massive fraud. This included changes in the staffing rules for the Central Election Commission.

Foreign-Facilitated Talks Vol. 2

Amid the opposition boycott, the EU and U.S. Ambassadors donned their mantles as facilitators again. On 12 November, they launched crisis talks between the Georgian Dream and the opposition. Four rounds – like the first time around – yielded no result. The fifth round was called off, as just two days before the new Parliament's opening, Georgian Dream campaign chief Irakli Kobakhidze tabled the bill to withhold funding from boycotting parties, as well as to terminate the election registration of the UNM, the largest opposition party on the grounds that one of its leaders, exiled former President Mikheil Saakashvili lived in Ukraine without Georgian citizenship and was thus in breach of the law forbidding campaigning by a foreigner.

Truncated Parliament: Single Party

The 10th convocation of the Parliament was inaugurated on 11 December in Tbilisi, with only Georgian Dream MPs present. None of the 60 opposition MPs attended, boycotting the legislature. Most of them formally resigned their seats.

In parallel to the Parliament's session, the United National Movement, European Georgia, Strategy Agmashenebeli, Lelo, and Labor Party leaders signed a memorandum, through which their elected MPs pledge to terminate their parliamentary mandates. Kremlin-friendly Alliance of Patriots gave up mandates late in December. Right-libertarian Girchi and the Citizens party did not formally renounce their mandates, holding out for the eventual success of foreign-mediation, but keep boycotting. This crisis was inherited in 2021.

Deepened Political Crisis

In Georgia, 2021 was a tumultuous year of continued and new crises, but also a year of attempted solutions, many of them with no success and some of them still underway. The year of memorable departures and arrivals, 2021 was of deals sealed and unsealed, unprecedented attacks against media.

On 18 February 2021, the Prime Minister Gakharia resigned. As it became known in the future, Gakharia could not reach an agreement in the Georgian Dream. Gakharia also said that he no longer agreed with the positions of the Georgian Dream, and he therefore left the party and the position.

The situation in the country at the time:

Nika Melia, chairman of the United National Movement party, was accused of organizing mass violence during the anti-government protests in 2019. When Melia declined to pay a \$12,000 bail, a Georgian court ruled that Melia should be detained before his trial. In response, Melia said the court's ruling was "unlawful", and on 18 February, Gakharia resigned over the decision to detain Melia. Melia was arrested while at United National Movement party headquarters on 23 February. The ruling Georgian Dream party supported Irakli Garibashvili to replace Gakharia, and the Parliament voted 89–2 to appoint him on 22 February.

EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell warned that the arrest of opposition MP and the head of the United National Movement opposition party Nika Melia would further deepen the Georgian political crisis and create additional barriers between the ruling party and the opposition to achieve an election agreement.

After rounds of negotiations with the opposition parties and Georgian Dream bail of Nika Melia - 40 000 GEL was transferred by the European Union on 8 May. Delegation of European Union in Georgia on 8 May said: *"Today, a bail worth 40.000 GEL was posted in order to allow for Mr. Melia's release from pre-trial detention. This follows the understanding reached by the political parties on 19 April 2021 in the context of the EU-mediated agreement. We would like to warmly thank two independent organisations who agreed to lend their valuable support in this process: the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) who made the funds available and the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) who transferred these funds to the authorities."*

On 10 May 2021, Melia left the prison.

Charles Michel Deal

Prime Minister Gakharia's resignation and jailing of the opposition leader made things more tense. European Council President Charles Michel designated a special envoy to mediate between the parties and later arrived himself to lead the process. Weeks-long talks culminated in 19 April deal, a compromise agreement envisaging steps and reforms to defuse the crisis.

The deal was proposed by President Michel after several weeks of mediation: *"It was reached in a truly European spirit and takes you towards your Euro-Atlantic future."* During his visit to Tbilisi, President Michel met with President Salome Zourabichvili and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. He stressed that the agreement was not a finishing line but a starting point for all political actors in Georgia to work towards consolidating the country's democracy and implementing reforms.

Under the EU-brokered deal, early parliamentary elections were to be called in 2022 if Georgian Dream gets less than 43 percent in local elections in October. It also set the rules for power-sharing in parliament, outlined reforms to the judicial system, and suggested reforms to the Central Election Commission.

The key points of the agreement were:

- All future **parliamentary elections** shall be fully proportional. The next two parliamentary elections shall have a threshold between natural and 2%.
- **Local elections:** a 4/1 ratio of proportional and majoritarian mandates for the 5 largest cities and 2/1 for all others; thresholds shall be 2.5% in Tbilisi and 3% everywhere else.
- **Central Election Commission:** 8 professional members and 9 political party members. Professional members appointed by two-thirds majority of the Parliament's full composition. One of the political party members representing an opposition party shall be Deputy Chairperson.
- **District Election Commissions:** same proportions and two-thirds majority in CEC on professional members' appointment.
- Clear criteria for the recounts of ballots shall be defined. The automatic 10% recount of all precincts on a random basis remains.
- A special task force shall be set up under the CEC's mandate to include Public Defender's Office and invite credible non-partisan election observer organisations, as well as trusted invited domestic and international experts, to review the dispute resolution process and provide timely recommendations to the CEC. The task force may be given additional functions such as involvement in recounts.

In line with the Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR Joint Opinions of 20 March 2021, related to two draft laws tabled in January 2021 to amend provisions on party registration and on party financing, the adoption of the proposed amendments shall be reconsidered.

The agreement text also stated that the parliament shall adopt ambitious judicial reform in this Parliamentary term, including the following, as the first step in a broad, inclusive and cross-party reform process.

To increase the independence, accountability and quality of the judicial system, the Georgian authorities will, in line with two packages of judicial reforms adopted in 2017 and 2019:

- a)** further enhance transparency and merit-based selections in the appointment of judges to first instance and appeal courts, notably by publishing written justifications for appointments of judges with reference to integrity and competence criteria;
- b)** submit to the Parliament draft legislation on the appointments to the Supreme Court in line with the related Venice Commission opinion No. 949/2019 of 24 June 2019, notably as concerns the staggered approach to appointments, open voting in the High Council of Justice, and the need for the latter to justify the nominations;
- c)** refrain from making appointments to the Supreme Court under existing rules;
- d)** adopt the legislation implementing the ruling of the Constitutional Court of Georgia from June 2019 by setting rules for the publication of judicial decisions.

The ruling party and part of opposition MPs signed, ditching boycott, and paving the way to constitutional amendments for judicial and electoral reforms. The United National Movement, the largest opposition party, refused to sign, which the Georgian Dream used as one of the excuses to quit the deal late in July. UNM signed later, but Georgian Dream never rejoined.

Lashkarava Death

Right-wing politics were back in the game in mid-year of 2021 when ultra-conservative, Russia-friendly businessman Levan Vasadze formed his own party, but he soon retreated from the spotlight citing health complications. But far-right sentiments saw dangerous rise again as large crowds gathered to oppose and obstruct the LGBTQ+ pride planned on 5 July. The organizers had to cancel the pride over safety concerns as mobs vandalized activists' office and physically assaulted over 50 media workers. Lekso Lashkharava, a cameraman who was severely beaten during pogroms, was found dead in his home days later. No justice has been served into Lashkarava's case so far.

The government and the ruling party leaders faced backlash for not doing enough to prevent the violence, as well as for inciting the crimes through anti-Pride statements, and for failing to punish the violence organizers. The developments also gave a rise to worries over the freedom of the press, that saw rise of attacks. Later, members of Alt-Info, a right-wing and openly Russia-friendly media outlet whose role in leading the 5 July homophobic pogroms has been well-documented, went unhindered to establish their own political party which they called "Conservative Movement."

2021 Elections

2021 local self-government elections were loaded with added significance due to the virtual 43% government legitimacy threshold. But the ruling party scoring up to 47% in the first-round proportional vote turned the so-called referendum irrelevant. But the Georgian Dream still suffered losses in most large cities, and 20 mayoral races went to runoffs. Smaller opposition parties underperformed compared to the United National Movement, with the return of ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili on the eve of the election believed to be a polarization booster. But they still emerged as kingmakers in several local councils. Ex-PM Gakharia's party ended third, albeit far behind Georgian Dream and UNM.

In tense runoffs, the ruling party won 19 out of 20 mayoral races amid concerns on part of local reputed watchdogs that election violations may have affected outcomes. Opposition protests erupted but slowly subsided.

Saakashvili Arrest

Ahead of the 2021 elections, Saakashvili promised to return to Georgia, saying the vote was “a referendum on ousting the Georgian Dream, and Ivanishvili from power.” He kept his word. Just before the election, he entered the country secretly in the container of a sea cargo ship, in violation of the law. On 1 October, it was announced that he had been arrested and sent to prison. There Saakashvili began a hunger strike and reports about his declining health, his forced transfer to a penitentiary hospital against his will further deepened polarization and sparked concerns about inhuman treatment and inadequate medical care. After continuous calls for his transfer to a properly-equipped clinic, Saakashvili was taken to Gori Military Hospital, where he stopped his hunger strike. As later revealed, earlier on the same day, the European Court for Human Rights ordered his transfer to a multi-profile clinic as requested by the Ombudsperson-convened medical council. Saakashvili was discharged despite his own protest from the hospital and moved back to the prison cell in Rustavi early on December 30. Till today he remains imprisoned.

Secret Files

Various reports leaked in media throughout 2021 pointed at questionable surveillance practices, including officials spying on each other and Georgian authorities eavesdropping on western diplomats. A leak of tons of alleged files of the State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) in mid-September marked a culmination and sparked outrage: on the one hand, the files pointed at massive state spying, including on clergy, diplomats, and media. On the other hand, the leaks exposed possible wrongdoings and abuses by clergy which both the state and the Georgian Orthodox Church turned a blind eye to.

Leak of alleged security-service files seeming to document widespread and long-running state surveillance of journalists, clergymen, and diplomats caused enormous scandal. This scandal

has caused serious damage to Georgia's reputation in the eyes of Western partners as a democratic country and a reliable ally.

Flawed Reforms

Reform agenda and related controversies continued to plague the country throughout 2021. The highlights were election and judicial reforms, both envisioned in the 19 April deal. Despite quitting the deal, Georgian Dream pledged to commit to the reforms and passed some changes. But the ruling party drew criticism from both Washington and Brussels over backtracking on adopting key changes, such as in the case of the rule of electing a prosecutor or constitutional amendments concerning the rule of conducting the next two parliamentary elections, as well as for the moves that would go against the reform spirits, such as the rushed process of filling vacant positions of Supreme Court justices.

The flaws eventually led the EU to warn not to disburse the macro-financial loan should Georgia fail the court reform, and Georgian leaders to refrain from asking the EU for the disbursement of the macro-financial loan citing economic revival while moving ahead with Supreme Court appointments. Other disagreements also followed as ruling party leaders did not hesitate to lash out at Western politicians and diplomats in response to their criticism.

ECtHR Ruling on 2008 War

An important development was the 21 January ruling of the European Court of Human Rights over the Georgia v. Russia case over the 2008 war, holding Russia responsible for the breach of six articles of the convention and a failure to conduct an effective investigation into the alleged breach of the right to life. The Court found the events following the ceasefire agreement of 12 August 2008 that ended the active phase of the war fell within the Russian jurisdiction for its effective control over the regions of Tskhinvali/South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which was welcomed by Georgia as strong documentation of Russian occupation of these territories.

Georgia's Application to the EU

Following the Russian invasion in Ukraine and the start of Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022, a day after Ukraine submitted an application to join the European Union, Georgia followed with the application to join the EU.

Tbilisi was previously planning to apply in 2024, after further reforms. But domestic political pressure, and apparent positive signals from Brussels, has sped up the process.

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili signed the formal application on 3 March asking for a speedy review. The move comes amid mounting controversy over the Georgian government's passive response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Tens of thousands of Georgians have been gathering nightly in Tbilisi to express solidarity with Ukraine and to demand a stronger response

from their government, which has said it won't join international sanctions against Russia.

Recent events have accelerated a growing divide between the Georgian government and its presidency under Salome Zourabichvili, who is publicly moving away from Russia. After Georgian Dream said it would not expedite its EU application, Zourabichvili met in Brussels with the presidents of the European Commission and European Council, Ursula von der Leyen and Charles Michel, to call for the speedier reception of aspiring EU nations.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kobakhidze said the government in Kyiv would have Georgia's support, but he declined to join the EU, US, and other nations in imposing economic sanctions on Russia.

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