

ISSUE BRIEF

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Georgia's Polarized Political Landscape on the Eve of Elections

The Georgian government announced August 1 that the country will hold parliamentary elections on the first of October. Eighteen parties and two coalition electoral blocks have registered to participate, but the contest will boil down to one between President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) and the newly formed Georgian Dream Coalition put together by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose entry into politics has enlivened the electoral landscape and made the race among the most competitive to take place in the former Soviet Union.

In his campaigning, Saakashvili touts his commitment to Georgia's democratic aspirations, success in reducing corruption, and improvements in public access to energy and other services. The government and/or its supporters have gone after the opposition's use of Ivanishvili's substantial fortune as a violation of campaign finance laws and insinuated he is a stooge of Moscow. The Georgian Dream Coalition, by contrast, is seeking to draw upon discontent with unemployment, inflation, and the country's estrangement from Russia to promote its electoral prospects. It has also attacked Saakashvili's commitment to democracy.

Most polls put the UNM well ahead, but the undecided/undeclared share of the electorate is substantial. The weeks remaining before the vote will be hard fought. Allegations are rife of improper behavior and attempts to buy and/or steal the election. The results of the voting cannot be predicted, but seem likely to be messy, and

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political jockeying and tensions will probably intensify ahead of the country's presidential contest in 2013. The election results will also bear substantially on Georgia's efforts to join Western institutions, ties with the United States, and, potentially, relations with Moscow.

Electoral System

This will be Georgia's seventh parliamentary election since achieving independence in 1991 and its first since the August 2008 war with Russia. Voters will elect seventy-

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Table 1: 2008 Parliamentary Election Results

Party	Percent of Vote	Seats Proportional Lists	Seats Single-Member Constituencies	Total Seats	Percent of Total Seats in Parliament
United National Movement	59 %	48	71	119	79%
United Opposition*	18%	15	2	17	11%
Christian Democrats	9%	6	-	6	4%
Georgian Labor Party	7%	6	-	6	4%
Republican Party	4%	-	2	2	1%

*Consisted of nine opposition parties: New Rights Party, Conservative Party, Georgia's Way, Freedom, On Our Own, Party of People, Movement for United Georgia, Georgian Troupe, and National Forum (Civil.ge, "CEC Releases Final Vote Tally," <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18471> [June 2008]).

seven of the unicameral parliament's 150 members through a party-list proportional-representation system and seventy-three from single-member constituencies. These constituencies, which have historical bases unrelated to their current population, range in size from 6,000 to 140,000 voters, diluting the vote of residents in more populous districts, a fact characterized by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, among others, as a violation of "one of the main principles of electoral rights—equality of the vote."¹ Georgia's modified, first-past-the-post system for the single-member district seats, in which a plurality of 30 percent is sufficient to take office, further skews the credibility of the process in the eyes of some observers, given the proliferation of parties and the opportunities for manipulation in smaller districts where relatively few votes can secure a parliamentary seat.

Election results are normally announced by the Central Election Commission (CEC). Preliminary results have generally been made available the morning after the voting. Formal certification follows no longer than nineteen days later, and the president should convene the newly elected parliament no later than October 21.²

1 Robert Dahl, "Georgia's Parliamentary Electoral System: Options for Advancing Voter Equality," International Foundation for Electoral Systems, http://www.ifes.org/~media/Files/Publications/Papers/2011/Georgias_Parliamentary_Electoral_System_2011.pdf (March 2011).

2 Civil.ge, "CEC Releases Final Vote Tally," <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18471> (June 2008) and Georgian Parliament, "Our Constitution—Article 51," http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=180&Itemid=85&lang=ge (June 2012).

2008 Election

The last parliamentary election in May 2008 saw Saakashvili's ruling UNM party score a decisive political victory based on nearly 60 percent of the popular vote and wins in all but two of the country's single-member constituencies—for 119 seats in parliament, nearly 80 percent of the total. A United Opposition coalition of nine parties came in second with 18 percent of the vote and 11 percent of the parliamentary seats. Minor parties won the remaining positions.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) judged the 2008 election an improvement over its predecessors, stating that it "clearly offered an opportunity for the Georgian people to choose their representatives from amongst a wide array of choices."³ Post-election criticism focused on the inequitable single-member constituencies; media coverage that was skewed in favor of the government; credible claims of intimidation on many sides of candidates, party activists, and state employees; and certain CEC activities that suggested a lack of proper independence from the government.

3 International Election Observation Mission, "Statement of Preliminary Findings," <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/32017> (May 2008).

2012 Election

As the 2012 parliamentary election approaches, Georgia's political landscape looks fractured, polarized, and personality-driven. "Democratic" credentials are important cards for both sides to play, perhaps especially in Europe and the United States, where the perceptions of the fairness of the electoral result will determine the nature of support that is given to the winning side and what Western political circles conclude about the winner. As a result, both sides have spent considerable amounts of money and time cultivating Western opinion and besmirching the reputation and bona fides of the other outside of Georgia as much as within it.

United National Movement (UNM)

Established in 2001, the UNM is led by Saakashvili, who helped galvanize the Rose Revolution that drove President Eduard Shevardnadze from power in 2003. Determined to address the country's lack of success in its early years of independence, the US-educated president has sought to modernize Georgia, consolidate governmental authority throughout the country, curb Russia's presence and influence, and associate Georgia firmly with the West as the best long-term guarantor of its sovereignty and independence.

The UNM government's accomplishments are impressive. It has significantly expanded public services, especially the availability of electricity and natural gas; greatly reduced corruption through reforms in education, the police, and elsewhere; and upgraded the country's roads and other infrastructure. The business climate has improved tremendously. With the European Union (EU), Georgia is negotiating a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement (DCFTA), and President Obama has expressed support for a US-Georgia free trade agreement (FTA) as well. Saakashvili was able to gain control over Adjara, formerly an autonomous region of Soviet Georgia that was ruled for nearly a decade after independence by a local strongman beholden to Tbilisi. The president won support for the proposition that his country "will be a member of NATO" at the Bucharest NATO Summit in April 2008 and forged a close relationship with the United States.

Saakashvili was, of course, less successful in reintegrating South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The war with Russia in 2008 and its legacies with Moscow, in European capitals, and among some in Washington are liabilities. Slow economic growth that persists despite impressive, pro-market reforms, and a lack of employment opportunities, especially in rural areas, are additional problems as the UNM seeks a third term.

Opinion surveys by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) put support of the UNM among likely voters at between 34 and 41 percent. According to its most recent polls, 38 percent of Georgians plan to vote for the UNM, a 4-point increase since June.⁴ Saakashvili's favorability rating dropped from 70 to 61 percent over the course of the spring and summer. However, he remains the country's third most favorably rated personality, behind Patriarch Ilia II and former Interior Minister Ivane "Vano" Merabishvili, whom Saakashvili promoted to prime minister in June. The president's job performance was rated neutrally or positively by 76 percent of respondents, behind only the patriarch, Merabishvili, and Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava. Unemployment remains the top concern for most Georgians, followed by territorial integrity and affordable healthcare. The ruling party gets strong marks from Georgian citizens for reforms of the pension system, improvements in education, and the performance of the police and army. Polls put the undecided/refuse to answer share of the electorate as high as 43 percent, suggesting a degree of ambivalence that could prove risky for the ruling party and Saakashvili as October 1 approaches.

Georgia Dream Coalition

The UNM's main contestant, the Georgian Dream Coalition, is an amalgamation of six opposition parties put together by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who heads the coalition's lead party, Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia. A political neophyte who made his fortune in post-Soviet Russia, Ivanishvili became one of the country's most popular citizens through generous investments to revitalize

4 National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia," <http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia-Political-Poll-PR-071612.pdf> (July 2012) and National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia," <http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia-Aug-2012-Survey.pdf> (September 2012).

Table 2: Georgian Dream Coalition Parties

Party	Founded	Leadership	Notes
Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia	April 2012	Party leader: Bidzina Ivanishvili Chairperson: Manana Kobakhidze	
Republican Party	1978	Chairperson: David Usupashvili	Currently has two seats in parliament
Our Georgia - Free Democrats	2009	Chairperson: Irakli Alasania	
National Forum	2006	Party Leader: Kakha Shartava	Party in 2008 Unified opposition
Conservative Party	2001	Chairperson: Zviad Dzidziguri	Party in 2008 Unified opposition
Industrialists	1999	Party Leader: Gogi Topadze Chairperson: Zurab Tkemaladze	

his home village of Chorvila and support for church, stadium, and arts projects and endeavors throughout the country. Upon entering politics in late 2011, he had his citizenship revoked for having earlier acquired French citizenship, an expatriating act under an irregularly enforced and confusing Georgian law, and this made him ineligible to stand for parliament. In response to criticism over this, the government changed the electoral code to allow him to run, but Ivanishvili has rejected the terms and will not be a candidate in October. He has, however, made clear that he expects to become prime minister if the Georgian Dream Coalition is successful. Two prominent opposition parties in Ivanishvili's Dream Coalition are Irakli Alasania's Free Democrats and the Republican Party.

The coalition's platform speaks about the importance of democratic institutions, expanding public services, and economic modernization and development. It declares adherence to the goals of NATO and EU integration, while also calling for less saber-rattling vis-à-vis Russia. However, components of the coalition have staked out positions less democratic and tolerant than the generally liberal and Western-friendly image Ivanishvili and his advisors have sought to project. For example, a controversial bill which gave five minority religious groups, including the Armenian Apostolic Church, the status of "legal entities under public law" was widely condemned by Coalition members last year. Ivanishvili himself stoked nationalist furor on this issue by suggesting it might lead to political

dominance of the country by non-Georgians.⁵ The Tolerance Center at the Office of the Public Defender made a public statement condemning recent anti-Turkish remarks, some of which can be traced to Dream members.⁶ US-based non-governmental organizations operating in Georgia have been criticized. Opposition channel TV9 ran a thirty minute smear campaign against Transparency International Georgia and its director, Mark Mullen.⁷ The coalition published an open letter to then-US Ambassador to Georgia John Bass asking NDI and the International Republican Institute (IRI) to cease polling in Georgia and claiming the organizations are biased.⁸

Coalition leaders campaign against what they characterize as Saakashvili's "one-man governance" and even go so far as to compare his way of ruling with that of Russian President Vladimir Putin. As evidence, they cite the fines levied against Georgian Dream and other coalition parties for alleged campaign finance violations, the confiscation of tens of thousands of satellite dishes provided to Georgians by Ivanishvili loyalists to facilitate access to pro-Georgian Dream media, and alleged Saakashvili plans to become

5 Maestro, "argumentebi tea sichnavastan 25/05/2012 (bidzina ivanishvili)," <http://maestro.ge/?address=reporter5&id=1658&page=1> (May 2012).
6 Public Defender of Georgia, "The Tolerance Center at the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia responds to cases of anti-Turkish xenophobia that have recently become frequent" <http://www.ombudsman.ge/index.php?page=1001&lang=1&id=1544> (August 2012).
7 TV9, "Mark Mullen Anatomy – Subtitled," <http://youtu.be/aD8KdPaJxLE> (August 2012).
8 Embassy of the United States in Georgia, "National Democratic Institute Polling (March 30)," http://georgia.usembassy.gov/latest-news/official_statements2012/ndi_polling.html (March 2012).

prime minister when term limits end his presidency in 2013. Ivanishvili also claims that Saakashvili is “separated from traditions and reality.”

These themes may have had some resonance. According to one poll, some 44 percent of Georgians regard Russia as a real and existing threat, but 87 percent disapprove of the country’s current relationship with Moscow, a sentiment that the Dream Coalition aims to capitalize on. Reflecting some combination of disenchantment with Saakashvili and the effects of Dream Coalition campaigning, the share of Georgian respondents who regard their country as a democracy declined from 49 percent in late February 2012 to 38 percent by June-July.⁹

Georgian Dream Coalition candidates include leaders of its various political parties, as well as a number of public figures who have been prominent in Georgia since independence. Others are non-political figures presumed to be beholden to Ivanishvili, including wrestlers, soccer stars, actors, Ivanishvili’s personal lawyer, and the former head of an Ivanishvili-owned bank.

Recent IRI and NDI polls put support for the Dream Coalition at 12 to 24 percent. NDI’s most recent survey has the coalition at the bottom end of this range with about 12 percent of the likely vote. Ivanishvili claims his group will get a minimum of 40 percent.

Other Opposition Parties

Several smaller parties, including some that ran candidates for office in 2008 as part of the United Opposition bloc, have opted to stay out of the Dream Coalition. The Christian Democrats (CDM), led by Giorgi Targamadze, hold six seats in parliament and stylize themselves as a socially conservative party that wishes to make Orthodox Christianity the state religion and restore the “moral face” of Georgian society.¹⁰ Targamadze is well-liked and is the

second highest-rated opposition figure after Ivanishvili. The party may have the best chance of any outside the Dream Coalition to clear the 5 percent threshold required to secure proportionally-distributed seats in the new parliament. Prospects seem dimmer for the other parties, though they could surprise pundits in the single-member districts.

Implications

As noted above, most recent polls suggest the UNM will score a significant victory, though this cannot be assured, especially given the large share of the electorate that is undecided or unwilling to declare their preferences to pollsters. A strong showing by Saakashvili and the UNM and a general perception that the voting was fair and the results reflective of the will of the voters will help consolidate the domestic reforms that Saakashvili has promoted. It will also give impetus to Georgia’s relations with Europe and the United States. The impact on the country’s frayed ties with Russia or on Abkhazia and South Ossetia is more difficult to predict.

The implications of a Georgian Dream Coalition win are also difficult to predict, including because Ivanishvili remains an enigmatic figure and his real political proclivities are little known. A divided government – with Ivanishvili as prime minister and Saakashvili as president – would make for greater instability in Georgian politics, the results of which would likely not be good. An Ivanishvili win would lead to a significant reexamination of US-Georgian relations and of the case for Georgia’s transatlantic goals and aspirations.

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9 National Democratic Institute, “Public Attitudes in Georgia,” <http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia-Political-Poll-PR-071612.pdf> (July 2012) and National Democratic Institute, “Public Attitudes in Georgia,” <http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia-Aug-2012-Survey.pdf> (September 2012).

10 Paul Rimple, “Who is Giorgi Targamadze?,” *The Tbilisi Blues*, <http://tbilisiblues.blogspot.com/2009/04/who-is-giorgi-targamadze.html> (April 2009).

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