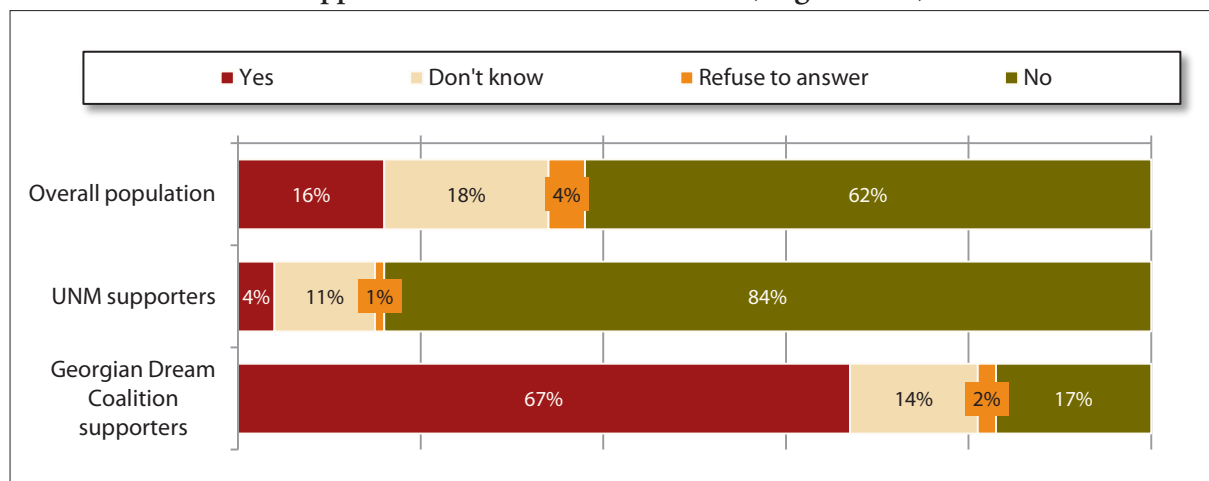


Figure 4: Bidzina Ivanishvili Has Said He Will Call for Street Protests If Elections Are Falsified. Would You Support His Call for Such Protests? (August 2012)



Source: Luis Navarro, Ian T. Woodward: *Public attitudes in Georgia: Results of an August 2012 survey carried out by the Caucasus Resources Research Center, NDI (National Democratic Institute), available online at <http://www.ndi.org/node/19283>*

International Implications of Georgia's Parliamentary Elections

By Niklas Nilsson, Washington

Abstract

Georgia's parliamentary elections have clear international implications. A peaceful transfer of power between opposing political parties will improve Georgia's chances of joining Western institutions. Similarly, while Georgian Dream leader Bidzina Ivanishvili has indicated a preference for improved ties with Russia, he is unlikely to change Georgia's main orientation toward the EU and NATO.

Linking Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy

The victory of the opposition coalition Georgian Dream—Democratic Georgia (GD) in Georgia's October 1 parliamentary elections seemingly caught both of the main contesting parties by surprise. The elections mark the beginning of three political transitions: that of GD from an opposition movement into the largest parliamentary faction and government; that of the United National Movement (UNM) from a dominant ruling elite into an opposition party; and that of Georgia from a country where transfers of political power takes place through revolutions to one where ruling parties can actually lose elections. Indeed, the outcome could signify the first step in Georgia's first peaceful and constitutional transfer of political power since independence. If Georgia proves capable of transferring political power

through elections, that will be a milestone in the country's political development.

However, the significance of these elections extends far beyond Georgia's domestic politics. The country's decidedly Western-leaning foreign and security policy under President Mikheil Saakashvili has built on a narrative about Georgia that firmly locates the country's future as an integral part of Europe and as a member of European and transatlantic security structures. The Georgian government has sought to underline its readiness for NATO membership by embarking on a range of technical reforms of its armed forces, as well as participation in UN and NATO missions, and has more recently begun negotiations for a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU.

Yet, the question of Georgia's domestic mode of governance has frequently been at the forefront of discus-

sions regarding the country's readiness for membership in the Western security community and the fact that the country introduced a superpresidential system of governance and a virtual monopolization of political power under one party after the Rose revolution has provided a serious obstacle to Georgia's Western endeavor.

This linkage has implied that a deep interconnection has been established between Georgia's foreign and security objectives and its ability to evolve into a pluralistic political system. This interconnection stems from the demands usually placed by Georgia's international partners on prospective members in Western institutions, but perhaps even more so from the foreign policy narrative the Georgian government has consistently communicated in Washington, Brussels and elsewhere.

Georgia's foreign policy narrative presents the country not only as a frontrunner reformer, but also as a "beacon of liberty"—the rare occasion of a democracy among otherwise authoritarian post-soviet states, constituting a positive example in this region and beyond. This assertion serves to underline Georgia's value to its Western partners, extending far beyond political developments in Georgia itself. Georgia's national security concept, adopted by parliament in December 2011, provides a good overview of these arguments and the close correlation between domestic governance and security in the government's foreign policy thinking.

Hence, Georgia's foreign policy strategy has to a large extent focused on establishing an international perception of Georgia both as a leading reformer and as a democracy. The Georgian government has actively promoted such perceptions, as well as the proposition that the UNM is the only political alternative capable of safeguarding the progress made.

This narrative has been criticized as a means for Georgia to market its foreign policy objectives rather than reflecting a philosophy implemented in domestic governance. However, Georgia's ambitious foreign policy goals, as well as its rhetorical adherence to democratic principles in addresses to foreign allies, has also served the positive purpose of raising the expectations on Georgia's democratic performance and invited closer international scrutiny of Georgia's domestic politics.

As the Georgian government's commitment to democracy has increasingly come under question, democracy in Georgia has featured prominently in discussions on the country's potential inclusion into Western institutions, most prominently NATO. In effect, to the extent that the Georgian government has introduced reforms aimed at creating conditions for more inclusive elections or a more pluralistic political system, such as changes to the electoral code and the 2010 constitutional amendments, these have frequently been attributed to

the critique leveled by international partners rather than by domestic opposition and civil society.

The Role of the UNM

Another aspect of the government's narrative about Georgia's success is that the UNM constitutes the only political power capable of securing a continuation of the process of reforming Georgia as a state, as well as guaranteeing its continued Western orientation. During the election campaign, accusations have frequently been leveled against GD leader Bidzina Ivanishvili and the opposition of not only secretly supporting Moscow's interests in Georgia, but also of attempting to bring the country back to its past of corruption, criminality and conflict.

In addition to Ivanishvili's and GD's struggle to present themselves to the Georgian public as a credible alternative to the UNM, which apparently turned out to be successful, the parallel struggle for international credibility between the competing parties has also been a clear feature of the election process. Ivanishvili's significant personal wealth has allowed GD to match the Georgian government's long-standing international lobbying efforts, especially in Washington DC. Thus, GD has promoted its competing narrative about developments in Georgia and made an important point of attacking Saakashvili and the UNM on exactly their democratic shortcomings to a U.S. political audience.

Against this backdrop, the parliamentary elections and their aftermath are potentially of paramount importance to Georgia's future standing with its Western partners as well as its opportunities for further integration with European and transatlantic institutions.

The fact that the elections obtained a largely positive evaluation in preliminary observer statements, and that the opposition actually won by a significant margin, will likely alleviate many concerns voiced about an increasingly authoritarian Georgia. By the same token, the fact that Saakashvili conceded defeat and appears ready to cooperate in transferring power to a GD-appointed government is clearly a positive signal to those fearing a protracted confrontation between the UNM and GD over the election results.

Georgia's International Image

Hence, the election outcome in itself has contributed positively to Georgia's international image. The execution and outcome of the elections have potentially provided for a significant step forward in Georgia's relations to the West. Several foreign dignitaries visiting Georgia ahead of the elections, not least Secretary Clinton and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas O. Melia, have attached enormous importance to the conduct of the elections and explicitly connected them to

Georgia's future integration into Western security structures. They have also been careful to express their neutrality regarding the parties running for parliament, in contrast to the critique frequently leveled at U.S. Georgia policy in the years following the Rose Revolution, of overt support for President Saakashvili and the UNM.

In this light, the elections themselves have produced a clear improvement of Georgia's international image and democratic credentials which if maintained will provide Georgia with a significantly strengthened argument for continued integration with European and transatlantic institutions. However, whether this impression will last now depends on the capability of Georgia's political forces to demonstrate sufficient political maturity to bolster this image.

It is indeed early to tell whether the above will translate into real progress regarding Georgia's foreign policy objectives.

A first major question is whether Georgia's main political forces will prove capable of constructive interaction following the fierce animosity expressed during the election campaign. While the GD has secured a majority in parliament and Ivanishvili expects to be appointed prime minister, Saakashvili remains president until the presidential elections next October, and until then retains the extensive powers imbued in the presidency by the Georgian constitution. Until a new constitution enters into force following the presidential elections next year, which transfers many of these competencies to the prime minister and strengthens parliament as a political institution, the president appoints the prime minister and can fire the key ministers of Interior and Defense.¹ This constitutional setup will require Ivanishvili and Saakashvili to cooperate on domestic, as well as foreign, policy over the coming year.

There are many pitfalls to such cooperation, where a pessimistic scenario would envision a Ukraine-style stalemate between president and prime minister. However, the fact that the current institutional arrangement could force the two dominant politicians and parties in Georgia to cooperate and compromise could also imply a healthy development in Georgian politics. While decision-making in Georgia will be a cumbersome process especially in the year to come, it should be borne in mind that remedies to the systemic fallacies of Georgia's democracy to date, including the weakness of key political institutions and the lack of a consolidated party system, are far more likely to evolve through a lengthy

process of political contestation and compromise than through top-down reforms by any one party in power.

In this perspective, the long-term implications of these elections for Georgia's standing in the West will depend on the ability of Georgia's main political actors to act constructively within the existing political system. There are certainly pitfalls along the way and Georgia's international partners have an immensely important role to play in mediating between Georgia's main political players in the year(s) to come, avoiding situations that could potentially lead to renewed confrontation and making sure that all players remain committed to the political process.

Ivanishvili's Foreign Policy Plans

A second question concerns Ivanishvili's foreign policy priorities. In statements given during the election campaign, Ivanishvili generally adheres to the course taken by the UNM government and advocates continued integration into NATO and the EU, while also arguing for improved relations with Russia. However, few details have been presented as to how these combined objectives are to be fulfilled. The question of NATO membership has been a major problem in Georgia-Russia relations and it is difficult to see how Ivanishvili would, as he has said, convince Russia that Georgian membership will not constitute a threat. However, Georgia's NATO membership has remained a distant objective since the 2008 war and is hence not presently an immediate Russian concern.

Improving relations with Russia will likely imply a more difficult balancing act. Initial statements from Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs make no secret that Moscow is happy with the election result. However, Ivanishvili will be vulnerable domestically to any accusation, which the UNM will likely not hesitate to put forward, of making concessions to Russia in the name of improved relations. While initial foreign policy gains in this relationship could potentially involve relaxed visa requirements or a partial lifting of the embargo Russia imposes on Georgian exports since 2006, any concessions Ivanishvili's government would be willing to make in exchange would likely vindicate those who believe that he is secretly fronting for Moscow. In this perspective, compromises over the most sensitive issue between the two states, the continued Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Russia's recognition of these entities as independent states, are highly unlikely under any Georgian government.

Ivanishvili has also hinted that he plans to scale down the previous government's rhetoric regarding Georgia's importance on a global level and plans to focus on Geor-

1 The president can also dissolve parliament, but not in the six months following a parliamentary election or the six months before a presidential election. Hence, the following year could provide a brief window for doing so in April, depending on the date of the presidential election.

gia's role as a regional player with constructive relations to all its neighbors. While this objective can perhaps be viewed as more realistic than Saakashvili's grand declarations of Georgia's geopolitical importance, it obscures the fact that Georgia's continued integration with NATO and the EU will unavoidably be conceived in geopolitical terms, not least by its northern neighbor.

Hence, it seems unlikely that Georgia's current foreign policy would undergo any major alterations under the leadership of GD and Ivanishvili.

Finally, it should be noted that the level of democracy in Georgia is far from the only obstacle the country has so far encountered in its attempt to become an accepted member of the Western community. Enthusi-

asm among NATO members toward Georgia as a prospective member is luke-warm at best and the issue will continue to be considered in a much larger geopolitical perspective where their relations to Russia are weighed in. The EU offers technical prospects for increased integration in the form of facilitated visa procedures and a DCFTA, but membership for Georgia is not in the cards even in a long term perspective. The carrots on offer are hence not very strong and Georgia's continued Western orientation to a significant extent depends on the continued perception among Georgia's political elite and public that the West is the only acceptable foreign policy choice.

About the Author

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CHRONICLE

From 24 September to 22 October 2012

24 September 2012	Azerbaijani, Georgian and Turkish troops held exercises near Ankara aimed at improving the security of energy pipelines in the region
25 September 2012	Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán visits Georgia and attends the opening of a reconstructed airport near Georgia's second largest city of Kutaisi
26 September 2012	Azerbaijan's prosecutor-general investigates allegations that lawmaker Gular Ahmedova had requested 1.3 million US dollars from an academic to secure him a seat in parliament as shown in a video posted on YouTube
27 September 2012	Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisian and European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Stefan Füle sign two financing agreements in Yerevan totalling 43 million Euros and focused on institution-building, including sectors such as customs administration, quality infrastructure, food safety and e-governance
30 September 2012	The Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church calls for a high voter turnout during the parliamentary elections in Georgia
1 October 2012	Parliamentary elections are held in Georgia with the Georgian Dream opposition coalition leading in the exit polls
2 October 2012	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili concedes the defeat of the ruling party United National Movement (UNM) during the parliamentary elections in Georgia and adds that UNM is now going into opposition
2 October 2012	The US congratulates Georgia on "successful" parliamentary elections, saying that the polls represent "another milestone" in the country's development towards democracy
2 October 2012	The Central Election Commission (CEC) releases early results of the parliamentary elections in Georgia with 54.89% for Georgian Dream and 42.42% for UNM
2 October 2012	The Armenian Parliament votes in favour of stripping opposition lawmaker Vartan Oskanian of his immunity to start a probe into money-laundering against him
3 October 2012	The flow of Azerbaijani natural gas via the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum pipeline is halted after an explosion hits the line near the Turkish village of Kars