

5th Annual Democracy Conference



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



National Endowment
for Democracy
Supporting freedom around the world



#GEODEM 2020

**ELECTIONS IN THE TIMES OF THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A NEW CHALLENGE
FOR GEORGIA'S UNCERTAIN DEMOCRACY?**

June-July / 2020



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



**National Endowment
for Democracy**
Supporting freedom around the world

Conference Notes N1

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

The Georgian Institute of Politics and its donors do not determine, nor do they necessarily endorse or advocate for, any of this report's conclusions.

This publication was produced with the support of the **National Endowment for Democracy (NED)**. The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Institute of Politics and the National Endowment for Democracy.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

5th Annual Democracy Conference (#GEODEM), *Elections in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic: A new challenge for Georgia's uncertain democracy?*, Conference Notes N1, Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), June-July, 2020.

© Georgian Institute of Politics, 2020
13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12
Email: info@gip.ge
For more information, please visit
www.gip.ge

Executive Summary

This year is vitally important for Georgia's democratic consolidation. The 2020 Parliamentary elections are a test which will determine the country's political dynamic for the next decade. Despite the progress achieved with the help of the international community, several factors currently damage Georgia's social-political environment. These include challenges related to the reforms within the electoral system, severe political and social polarization, a nihilistic attitude among the population, a long tradition of ruling parties using administrative resources for political gains and, a visible disproportionality between donations to different political parties. In addition to these factors, the COVID-19 pandemic brings its own unique technical, political and social threats to the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Considering these challenges, the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) held the 5th Annual Democracy Conference "Elections in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic: A new challenge for Georgia's uncertain democracy?" Considering the pandemic, the GIP held the three online conference panels on June 17, July 1 and July 14. At the same time, the organization has published a compendium of policy briefs which represent an analysis of the ongoing political processes. The compendium covers the research of senior GIP analyst – Bidzina Lebanidze, GIP analysts – Levan Kakhishvili and Salome Minesashvili and New Vision University professor – Gvantsa Davitashvili. Members of political and civil society, subject matter experts, academic circles, citizens, and other actors interested in the process of Georgia's democratic development will find use of the compendium.

Director of GIP – Professor Kornely Kakachia offered the opening remarks of the conference. Panels were moderated by **Stefan Meister** - head of the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Tbilisi Office; **John DiPirro** – representative of the International Republican Institute (IRI); and **Nino Gelashvili** – Journalist, Radio Liberty. Speakers included: **Tamar Zhvania** – Chairperson of the Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC); **Giorgi Tsereteli** – member of "European Georgia" and President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly; **Mamuka Khazaradze** – Chairperson of "Lelo for Georgia"; **Salome Samadashvili** – member of the "United National Movement"; **H.E. Kelly Degnan** – Ambassador of the United States to Georgia; **H.E. Justin McKenzie Smith** – Ambassador of the UK to Georgia; **Viola Von Cramon** – member of the European Parliament, "European Green Party"; **Christian Urse** – head of the Council of Europe Office in Georgia; **Tamar Chugoshvili** – independent member of Parliament; **Shota Dighmelashvili** – Co-founder of the "Shame" Movement and the Governance Monitoring Centre, Journalist, and Executive Editor at Forbes Georgia; **Mikheil Benidze** – representative of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and **Tamar Kintsurashvili** - Executive Director of Media Development Foundation (MDF).

Major findings of the conference:

- Coronavirus presents an important administrative and infrastructural challenge to the 2020 Parliamentary elections. Despite this, there are no discussions of either changing the election date or the voting method.
- At this stage, as part of the preparatory measures, the CEC is focused on informing voters, mobilizing required equipment to ensure safety, and simplifying the election process as much as possible using electronic means.
- The pandemic presents a challenge in terms of worsening social and democratic conditions, which creates an unequal pre-election environment for opposition parties.
- Opposition parties fear that there is a threat of politicizing the pandemic: during this period, voters have become more vulnerable and the resources of the government have increased.
- Limited communication with voters due to the threat of the Coronavirus is an important problem for political parties as there is no alternative to direct communication. Even though traditional and social media are actively used, an unfair media environment and insufficient internet penetration remains a challenge.
- It is important that observer missions engage more actively during the pre-election and election period. While at the same time Georgia should prove to the international community via elections that it is steadily moving towards democratic development.
- Constitutional amendments approved on June 29, 2020, which ruled that the parliamentary elections of 2020 will be held using 120/30 principle, were positively assessed by every speaker of the conference. Georgia's international partners view the elections held using this method of distributing the mandates, as contributing to multi-party and pluralist environment in the Parliament of Georgia.
- Despite positive constitutional changes, the international community argues that during the election campaign and election day, effective mechanisms should be put in place to avoid using administrative resources, and ensuring more transparency and proper functioning of the election commission.
- International partners have an important role at this phase of Georgia's democratization process in terms of security, free trade, mediation and objective assessment of reforms. However, international actors unanimously agree that with more development, involvement of international actors in domestic decision-making will become less important.
- Discussions on women's political engagement clearly illustrate that international actors are limited to providing recommendations. Furthermore, gender quotas or other means of encouraging women's political participation must be the prerogative of political parties.

- The importance of independent media is highlighted in two areas: in terms of maintaining a balanced approach despite the commercial interests of media organizations, and, in terms of independent media organizations natural resistance towards disinformation coming from Russia and other external actors.
- The threat coming from Russia is important in terms of interference by external actors [in elections], specifically cyber-attacks. However, in this case, external intervention does not refer to the Kremlin only as the issue has become more complex. Furthermore, external involvement in elections is not only an issue in Georgia as it has become a global problem.
- Civil Service Reform was named in the context of implementing important reforms in Georgia as public administration is the cornerstone of the state. As such, the international community considers the proper implementation of the reform to be vitally important.
- An electoral system granting unlimited power to the winning party contributes to the polarization and radicalization of political actors. In this context, election reform enabling the 2020 parliamentary elections to be held using 120/30 principle, and 2024 elections with fully proportional system, is an important step forward. This encourages parties to cooperate more, reducing the level of polarization.
- Using social networks for political objectives, where disinformation and material intended for the radicalization of voters is shared, further contributes to the radicalization of the society. In this context, it is important to ensure financial transparency about the origin of sponsored political content while limiting unauthentic and deceitful behavior.
- To an extent, the media also contributes to the polarization and radicalization of society and political actors. As a rule, dominant TV outlets follow political lines and are being instrumentalized. In this context, it is important that media is self-sufficient and does not strictly rely on donations in order to ensure a certain level of independence and fulfil its function of informing the voters.
- The role of international actors is important as a measure of reducing polarization between political parties. When the issues are unable to be resolved at the domestic level, involvement of international actors is important, particularly in the context of the 2020 elections.
- Civil societies impact on the 2020 parliamentary elections is also worthy of attention. It is important that they raise awareness among voters about undertaking their civil duties as well as put more effort into their observatory functions during the 2020 pre-election period.

The following report presents the major highlights and findings from each panel discussion.

Panel I: 2020 Parliamentary Elections Amid COVID-19

June 17, 2020

Moderator:	John DiPirro, International Republican Institute (IRI)
Speakers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tamar Zhvania, Chairperson of the Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC) • Giorgi Tsereteli, member of the European Georgia and the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly • Mamuka Khazaradze, Chairperson of “Lelo for Georgia” • Salome Samadashvili, member of “United National Movement”

The panel focused on the following key questions:

- How does the COVID-19 pandemic effect the pre-election environment in Georgia? Considering the existing context, can Georgia hold fair and competitive elections while at the same time ensuring public health?
- What are the major challenges which may hinder the democratic process in the 2020 parliamentary elections?
- How can parties interested in the election process overcome new challenges created by the pandemic?
- What can be done to ensure that the election results are recognized by all parties? What factors contribute to the legitimacy of the election?

According to the first speaker, **Tamar Zhvania**, the election process has faced serious challenges not only in terms of holding the election, but also in terms of training and educational activities. Therefore, the conference hosted by the GIP and the participation of different parties is a very important step towards future cooperation and there are recommendations with regards to organizing elections which have to be considered. This process is being planned in accordance with a changing situational analysis, since the pandemic environment remains uncertain from a long-term perspective. Despite this, the CEC is still considering planning and holding educational programs to ensure adequate participation of voters and involving the parties in the election process.

One of the issues mentioned by Tamar Zhvania relates to drastic changes we may expect in terms of holding parliamentary elections during the pandemic. According to the speaker, international practices are being actively examined. During this period approximately 52 elections have been postponed worldwide, while 19 have been held. In this context, the cases of Lithuania, France and South Korea are noteworthy. Considering other countries experience, Zhvania noted that there are neither plans for fundamental changes with regards to the

elections nor discussions on some kind of alternative means of voting: at this stage, bearing in mind the time factor, changing the way of voting is unrealistic.

Another topic highlighted by the speaker was safe and successful use of online systems at different phases of the election. It was emphasized that the CEC is actively working on introducing online platforms to simplify processes such as double-checking voter lists, registering and staffing members of parties, and observer missions and other commissions. In this process, cyber security is considered to be a primary challenge. However, Zhvania also mentioned that USAID, on behalf of the US and other international actors, has provided significant support in this area and therefore the CEC can ensure the security of virtual services to the highest degree.

According to Zhvania, current priority areas include following recommendations related to the pandemic as much as possible; reaching an agreement among parties on the election environment and informing voters, to the greatest extent possible, about safe voting procedures.

The second speaker of the discussion panel was **Giorgi Tsereteli**, who participated in the conference as a member of the party European Georgia and as the acting president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, as such he discussed the elections from both perspectives.

According to Tsereteli, the pandemic created two distinct problems: society must pay attention not only to economic but also democratic recovery, because executive power has played a major role during the state of emergency there is a risk that Parliament may become somewhat distanced from ongoing processes in the country. The coming elections will have a major role in preventing this scenario.

As for the election date, despite the fact that some countries have decided to postpone elections, it is important to consider the specific Georgian context for democratic processes. According to Tsereteli, elections are already complicated in Georgia, even before the Coronavirus: in addition to the prolonged legislative process, preparing the electoral administration and ensuring a fair election environment for voting and monitoring during the pandemic remains a challenge. As Tsereteli noted, both aspects are worthy of attention not only in terms of domestic challenges, but also in terms of international observation because it is important to demonstrate that Georgia can hold significant democratic elections. Even though the CEC has a long list of recommendations, implementing them requires prolonged legislative processes which should have started long before the elections. This casts a shadow over the overall democratic process.

In addition to the challenges related to the democratization, Giorgi Tsereteli discussed the problems of preparing an electoral administration. According to him, direct voting cannot be replaced by either legislative or infrastructural resources. Infrastructure is a visible challenge and significant efforts have to be put into protecting not only voters, but also commission members.

At the end of his address, Tsereteli noted that the upcoming elections is of interest to Russia and is therefore being observed. Because of this, associated risks including cyber involvement increase and must be carefully regarded.

The next speaker of the panel discussion, **Salome Samadashvili**, discussed the worsening social and economic conditions, which she considers to be an avenue for government manipulation of voters. Therefore, public trust towards the election as a means of ensuring stability becomes questionable. According to Samadashvili, this problem existed even before the Coronavirus. The major reason behind this was the fact that four months prior to the October elections, the system through which the elections would be held was not even known, which, according to the legislator, is unprecedented in the history of Georgia. Controversial statements from the government and prolonged constitutional processes, as well as recommendations which are still far from being fulfilled by the electoral administration, further complicates the situation.

Salome Samadashvili noted that the pandemic has already effected elections, since it altered conditions for pre-election campaigning and put opposition parties in unfavorable positions. The period during the state of emergency was used by the government for party goals, which led to the crisis budget being fully accommodated to the ruling party needs. Moreover, new regulations serve to repress the opposition, while difficult social conditions make it easier to buy off voters. Therefore, Samadashvili considers the pandemic as being politicized and thinks that it would be self-deceiving to view the technical challenges of the pandemic as being more problematic than the existing political context. According to her, political discussions and consensus are important to handle this situation, including changing the election date.

The last speaker of the panel, **Mamuka Khazaradze**, emphasized the importance of interparty cooperation, since, according to him, a one party approach is not sufficient in this complex situation and in order to handle it, it is important to consider the views of different sides. Despite Khazaradze representing a rather new political power, his party has already had to deal with restrictions related to the pandemic and injustice caused as a result of it.

As Khazaradze notes, the government has politicized the health of the individual as the government always uses elections, and its resources for political gains. According to Khazaradze, two factors need to be considered in the context of the pandemic: health of the population and instrumentalization of the pandemic. Therefore, historically, every election in the past 30 years has been accompanied by the negative context. The claim that the government uses the pandemic for its political gains is evident by the fact that surveilling the party activities became more frequent with opening of new regional offices of Lelo for Georgia. To avoid similar circumstances, Khazaradze considers it essential to introduce a new law. For him, cooperation to formulate some sort of rules of fair play is also important.

Khazaradze criticized the anti-crisis plan as well and assessed it as an indirect buy off of the voters. According to him, this plan does not serve economic recovery. In this context,

Khazaradze raised an initiative according to which, it would be favorable if international monitoring was not limited to the election process only at the time when there are travel restrictions in place, but to also include the pre-election period, in order to mobilize the international community in the period prior to the election day.

Discussion followed the speakers' remarks and included questions on technical and logistical alternatives for organizing the elections, communicating with voters in times of a pandemic, coordination between parties, and on hate speech in the Georgian political environment.

The first topic examined during the discussions was the unequal pre-election environment for the political parties and in this context, the alternatives for communicating with the voters. Party representatives agreed that the space for direct communication has been unequivocally reduced and that traditional or social media will be actively used during the pre-election campaign. However, this alternative also faces challenges: opposition party representatives voiced concerns about a polarized media environment and unjust distribution of party parity in favor of the ruling party. Meanwhile, considering the fact that Georgia has the worst index of internet penetration in the region, active use of social media will not be able to sufficiently replace direct communication.

Discussions held during the Q&A session once more illustrated that even in the worst-case scenario related to the pandemic, voting online or in open areas is not feasible in Georgia. Despite the fact that the idea of changing the voting method or altering the election day have been voiced, according to Tamar Zhvania, these options are not being considered at this stage. Mistrust towards not only the government and election process, but also towards political parties was named as one of the key challenges. While discussing the issue, speakers agreed that it is important to pay attention to hate speech as one of the characteristics of polarization and to concentrate more on strategies to reduce it. However, in this context the biggest problem appears to be fake news and if there is any specific area where government sanctions must be strengthened, it should be related to preventing the spread of misleading information.

Panel II: International Actors and Elections

July 1, 2020

Moderator:	Stefan Meister, head of the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Tbilisi Office – South Caucasus Region
Speakers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H.E. Kelly Degnan, Ambassador of the United States to Georgia • H.E. Justin McKenzie Smith, Ambassador of the UK to Georgia • Viola Von Cramon, member of the European Parliament, European Green Party • Christian Urse, head of the Council of Europe Office in Georgia

This panel focused on the following key questions:

- What is the role of the international community in Georgia's democratization process?
- To what extent do the recent pragmatic changes to EU external and neighborhood policy effect the EU's approach to Georgia?
- To what extent does the EU, the USA and other international actors affect the election process in Georgia?
- What is the role of international watchdog and non-governmental actors in Georgia's election process?

The first speaker of the panel discussion - **H.E. Kelly Degnan**, Ambassador of the United States to Georgia - reiterated the United States' long-standing and stable support of Georgia in terms of strengthening its democracy, as well as economic development, prosperity and stability. The US Ambassador positively assessed the approval of the constitutional changes related to the electoral system on June 29.

According to Degnan, the US is very proud of this partnership. The Ambassador outlined four key areas, through which the US supports Georgia's democratic development. She stated that Washington is a committed partner to Georgia in terms of development, security and at the same time has a role as a neutral arbiter and an objective evaluator. She also emphasized the special role of other international actors and local non-governmental sectors, such as the media and civil society. In terms of development, the US is supporting Georgia to identify priority areas and to develop strategies to ensure that it achieves its set objectives. As an example, she cited financial support provided by the USAID to develop Georgia's education system. The list also included the rule of law, strengthening civil society, strengthening political parties and improving political education. The second area covered security, in which Georgia is an important partner for the US. As the Ambassador noted, a well-functioning security system, in general, is important to overcome economic and financial challenges. According to Degnan, strategic partnership between the two countries, and resources

allocated by the US to Georgia, is very important in terms of security. She also emphasized Georgia's role in ensuring international security. The third area in which the US considers itself to have a special role is that of a neutral arbiter. During her remarks, Degnan mentioned that the US can act as an objective evaluator of Georgia's progress, however, she also added that the US is not the only actor and noted that other actors also can also provide interesting feedback to the country. In the end, H.E. Kelly Degnan focused on the US role as a mediator during negotiations between different sides and creating opportunities for cooperation between various blocks and parties. According to her, this role is especially important in an openly polarized environment.

The second speaker of the conference, Ambassador of the UK to Georgia, **Justin McKenzie Smith** discussed the role of the international community during the elections. In the beginning of his remarks, he referred to the parliamentary model of the first Republic of Georgia in 1919 and emphasized the fact that in that period, five women were elected as the members of parliament. He observed that at that time the state of Georgia itself played an important role and managed to bring about the change, while during the elections of 1991, international community had a major part in it. The Ambassador chronologically discussed the crucial changes in a historical context during the last 30 years in Georgia and assessed the changes of June 29, 2020 as having historical importance. McKenzie Smith ascribed this success to the efforts of the people of Georgia in the first place and also expressed gratitude towards international facilitators - some of them the speakers of that panel discussion. He also expressed the hope that in the future the role of the international community in Georgia would become less significant.

From the Ambassador's standpoint, the saying "practice makes perfect" is neither relevant nor applicable when it comes to elections. As he explained, per the experience of other countries, it is important to take into account and follow new recommendations during every election to achieve progress. Elections are meant to protect the foundation created by the society. According to Smith, another area the international community may work on is the implementation of reforms, including public administration reform, referring to the civil service as the backbone of the state. Justin McKenzie Smith also emphasized the need, and critical importance of, objective media "even if it goes against commercial logic", in order to provide the population with the access to authentic information.

At the end of his remarks, the Ambassador once again highlighted UK's commitment to cooperate with Georgia in security, education, trade and other areas. He also noted that Georgia's democratization needs to be nurtured and expressed optimism towards the youth being passionately committed to protecting Georgian democracy.

The next speaker of the panel discussion, **Viola von Cramon** talked about the significance of cooperation with Georgia within the South Caucasus and noted that the Parliament of Georgia is always ready to cooperate with the European Commission and the European Parliament. She highlighted that, in terms of the quality of cooperation, the Parliament of Georgia is one of the most active in the region noting, "there was always an interest from the Parliament of

Georgia, active involvement and staff being ready to travel and participate in the discussions. We can also positively assess cooperation with the administration of the Parliament". As an example, she cited her visit to Ukraine in 2010-2012, where she witnessed talks on ongoing reforms in Georgia in the areas of public administration and the patrol police, which, according to her were unique ways of implementing reform. Cramon proudly noted that Ukraine took the Georgian model of patrol police reform as an example, which, according to her, is an example of excellent experience sharing between countries. The speaker underlined the importance of the constitutional amendments adopted before the 2020 election and positively assessed them. However, she noted that not every opposition party used this opportunity to participate in supporting the change. At the end, she stated that international partners can only provide recommendations, while the final decision is up to the Parliament of Georgia and Georgian politicians.

Von Cramon also addressed the problem of female representation in Georgian Parliament and politics in general. However, she clarified that this is not a unique problem characterizing Georgia in the South Caucasus highlighting the fact that Western Europe also faces the challenge of gender equality in politics. According to her, "one can always measure the level of maturity of democracy".

The last speaker of the panel discussion, **Cristian Urse** noted that the Council of Europe has particularities which brings together diverse countries, such as the UK and Georgia as members of the same organization. According to Urse, the Council of Europe supports Georgia in improving the electoral process, and that all supporting measures are implemented. Unlike other organizations, the members of the Council of Europe do not have to take the position of external observers. Georgia was chairing the Committee of Ministers between November 2019 and May 2020 and its priority was the link between human rights and environmental protection. This is the legacy created by Georgia and successfully carried on by the international community. As Urse noted, it is important to assess Georgia's progress in terms of elections during the past 20-30 years. He read out the recommendations from the 1994 document that mentioned the expansion on part of the Parliamentary Assembly to grant the opportunity of membership to other countries in addition to the Baltic States. 25 years ago, it was stated that Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine and Moldova could become the members of the Union in the case that these countries would declare their desire to become part of Europe. Over the years, the development of these countries has been apparent, and the progress of Georgia has been clearly demonstrated as well, specifically in 2003. The idea to switch to a proportional model of elections has remained in the agenda over the years and this recommendation is also outlined in the documents of the Council of Europe. This became possible with the new constitution of 2017, which also enabled the introduction of partially proportional system. As Urse noted, the fact is that there was a discussion between the parties and that this discussion is still ongoing. Parliamentary opposition participated in these discussions and they had an important role in popularizing the idea within society. The speaker concluded that it is important to ensure that the political climate during the elections is equal and pluralistic.

After the remarks of the speakers, participants of the second panel discussion were able to ask questions and provide comments. Audience questions were directed towards several key areas mostly concerning cyber security during the elections; the risk of complicating international observer missions; the expectations of international actors with regards to the quality and standards of 2020 elections; and the prospect of improving feminist policy in the country.

In response to the question on cyber security, Kelly Degnan noted that she sees a threat of disinformation from Russia before the election. According to her, it is important to implement cyber hygiene mechanisms to prevent the use of administrative resources, to ensure transparency of financial resources and ensure a well-functioning election commission.

Justin McKenzie Smith noted that the problem of external involvement is a problem of global scale and advised the idea to identify and use natural protection mechanisms. He referred back to the elections of 2016-2017 and stated with confidence that while there were attempts to potentially interfere in the elections, they were held peacefully. McKenzie Smith highlighted the importance of media independence, a free justice system and the involvement of youth in political processes. With regards to women's political involvement, the Ambassador noted that in Georgia political parties can take the lead and overcome the challenge of women's representation in politics.

Viola von Cramon responded to the question on cyber security and noted that interfering in elections is a norm for Russia. Like the previous speaker, she also mentioned natural counter measures such as an independent critical media able to resist Russian narratives. She clarified that resistance and disinformation does not only come from Russia and that the process has become even more complex. As von Cramon stated, cyber security is one of the areas within the Eastern Partnership format that the EU is heavily investing in. With regards to gender quotas, she noted that this is dependent on political party leaders and that inclusion of women and minorities in party lists is a prerogative of political parties.

At the end Cristian Urse made final remarks and mostly focused on holding elections during the Coronavirus pandemic. He mentioned that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has initiated hearings on this subject. He positively assessed the Government of Georgia with regards to its crisis management and highlighted the fact that the Georgian authorities are already preparing to respond to a second wave. According to Urse, if the state of emergency is not re-introduced, there will not be a problem for the arrival of observer missions to observe elections while social distancing. He highlighted the fact that we should avoid misusing and instrumentalizing the risks.

Panel III: Polarization and Radicalization of Electorate

July 14, 2020

Moderator:	Nino Gelashvili, Radio Liberty
Speakers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tamar Chugoshvili, independent member of the Parliament • Shota Dighmelashvili, Co-founder of the “Shame” Movement and Governance Monitoring Centre, Journalist, Executive Editor at Forbes Georgia • Mikheil Benidze, representative of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) • Tamar Kintsurashvili, Executive Director of the Media Development Foundation (MDF)

The third panel focused on the following key questions:

- What are the main reasons behind the radicalization of voters?
- To what extent is voter radicalization a strategy for political parties?
- How is social media used to polarize voters? Why did social networks become an effective tool for harmful actors? Has the media become a tool to weaken democracy?
- How is electorate radicalization reflected on the processes of democratization?
- What can be done to respond to this challenge?

The first speaker of the panel discussion, **Tamar Chugoshvili** highlighted the important role that the 2020 parliamentary elections will play in the country's democratic development and discussed the damage polarization can bring in the context of the upcoming elections. She noted that polarization is a global trend, but focused on the features characterizing polarization and radicalization in Georgia. More specifically, about the reasons which enable the polarization of political processes and voter radicalization.

Parliamentarian Chugoshvili noted that the unsophisticated nature of the party system has had a major impact on the country's democratic and stable development. To a certain extent, this is the reason why the political parties have not yet presented their vision or roadmap for the development of the country. Instead, we are witnessing more negative campaigning from parties. What is more, political process, and eventually elections, boil down to who is bad and who is worse, who is less of an evil, while discussions on who has the right vision is becoming secondary. The speaker also highlighted the fact that in Georgia parties are established around financial centers of gravity, or individual leaders, instead of ideology. It is true that there are some small and weak parties which are based on ideology, however, it is currently not sufficient to encourage a healthy political process.

Chugoshvili said that in order to retain a certain level of independence the media needs income from the advertising market, however, in Georgia the advertising market is rather limited and does not cover the costs. There is a significant political money in Georgian media but it is accompanied with political ideology and toes political lines. Media outlets which do so become more dominant in Georgian TV broadcasting. This is a damaging tendency because the media plays a significant role in deepening polarization, and voters become unable to make an informed decision which is very important.

The way out of this problem is in the country's general economic development and the eventual growing of the advertising market, which is not a short-term objective. Until then, politicians will be tempted, and have sufficient grounds to, promote their political agenda in the media. Georgia needs more media alternatives which are free from executing political orders.

According to the speaker, the third factor contributing to polarization and radicalization is the electoral system. The electoral model which had been in place in Georgia until now has encouraged confrontation because it was based on a winner takes all principle. This is the reason why the justice system, the state government, local governments, independent institutions, etc. all end up in the hands of the winning party.

Chugoshvili noted that for the upcoming elections circumstances are such that the ruling party is trying to stay in power for a third term. Maintaining power for a third term is very hard in free countries, since negativity accumulates in any society towards any government. As of today, the Georgian Dream does not have the resources for a positive agenda and it only possesses negative, dark elements which highlight the fact that all other alternatives are worse.

In the view of the second speaker, **Shota Dighmelashvili**, the opportunities to build bridges and reduce polarization during the 2020 election period do not seem realistic. According to Dighmelashvili, politicians have nothing positive to offer to voters and discussed campaigns built around discreditation and negative agendas. Polarization is certainly a systemic problem which prevents the renewal of the political field. Alternative opinions are repeatedly attacked and very frequently similar viewpoints are attributed to one of the antipodes.

The speaker focused on changing the electoral system as a systemic solution to polarization and radicalization. In a proportional electoral system, the winner does not take it all and it encourages more engagement from citizens. Strengthening local governance is also important to enable citizens to solve problems locally. While this will only work in a mid-term perspective, it remains one of ways to solve the problem.

Shota Dighmelashvili also discussed the issue of TV broadcasting. According to him, broadcasters have their share of responsibility, however, disagreed with the opinion that Georgian advertising market is not sufficiently developed. For instance, Georgia has a higher indicator of advertising income per capita (in USD) than Azerbaijan. He noted that restrictions

to receive income from advertising were applied to private broadcasting companies after Georgian Dream came to power, while the public broadcaster became competitor to other broadcasting companies in terms of the advertising business.

The speaker also discussed the social media problem. As Dighmelashvili noted, Facebook is well integrated into Georgia's social fabric. He mentioned that hate speech, political ads and relevant content are not marked accordingly. Significant amount of black political money is directed towards social networks, unauthentic pages are created and conflicts are encouraged with the illusion of discussions; all of this plays into the government's hand.

In the end, Dighmelashvili noted that radical groups are being instrumentalized by the government. The problem of radicalization and polarization requires a systemic solution - for instance, changing the electoral system while strengthening local governance, which provides opportunities for people to engage in politics.

The third speaker of the panel, **Mikheil Benidze** noted that radicalization and polarization became a feature of Georgian politics in the last couple of years. He emphasized that one of the contributing factors is the electoral system which creates an environment in which a political power either possesses everything, or nothing. Frequently, both political poles try to ascribe alternative civil or political groups to either one or the other antipodes. The speaker referred back to the 2018 presidential elections, when, it was evident how various political powers were trying to label civil sector and observer organizations. All this is indicative of the fact that there are attempts to demonize any kind of different opinion.

Discussions were also held around the topic of voters. According to Benidze, aggressive rhetoric and radicalization is reflected on voters as well. As an example, Benidze cited aggressive activities in regions, raiding opposition party offices, attempts to disrupt public meetings of politicians which could later turn into physical violence. This of course has a negative impact on the election process. Part of the reason is politicians' rhetoric overstepping the boundaries, including representatives of the ruling party. Government, which should be facilitating a stable and peaceful environment for the election process, is particularly responsible for it.

Mikheil Benidze expressed hope that the election reform will alter the rules of the game, improving the political culture and forcing parties to focus more on cooperation and positive agendas than on confrontation. It is not easy, but it is important in order to transform Georgia into a European democracy.

The speaker also focused on groups which have transformed into political parties to try to focus on sensitive and problematic issues of the society. According to him, the change of the electoral system has provided new opportunities for similar groups.

In the end, Benidze discussed the importance of informed decisions. He noted that social media is important in that regards, since political actors are actively using it. Despite the fact

that negative campaigns have been observed in the past, it has now become the norm. Political parties are behind negative campaigns on social networks, and Georgian Dream is particularly worthy of attention, since they operate on a scale far larger than others, which has been confirmed by Facebook itself not too long ago.

The fourth speaker of the panel discussion, **Tamar Kintsurashvili** started her remarks with a discussion on the instrumentalization of media. Kintsurashvili noted that social media contributes to radicalization to a certain extent. While social media promotes democracy and pluralism, some actors are trying to misuse it and spread disinformation.

Discussing the media in general, the speaker drew parallels with other countries and noted that media polarization is an issue everywhere. However, there had been a consensus among different actors that has reduced this problem to a certain extent. Similar agreement is possible when business [interests] are delimited, which is not the case in our country. Instrumentalization remains a problem in traditional media. Tamar Kintsurashvili agreed with the opinion that media is not self-sufficient and that its income is subsidized. According to her, if media is not profitable, then it relies on a political agenda.

The speaker also noted that competing political interests ensure pluralism on the Georgian market, which is not self-sufficient. TV broadcasters that are more or less balanced rely on donors. It is vitally important for the society to have different platforms to receive information and make informed decisions.

Tamar Kintsurashvili later focused on the fact that government resources far exceed those of other actors. Hostile attitudes towards critical media outlets were evident during both the previous and the current government. However, the problem is that similar hostile attitudes are not directed towards the outlets related to Russia. Non-governmental organizations criticizing the government are also considered to be hostile.

Anti-liberal groups which have become mainstream are also worthy of attention. The speaker referred to disrupted demonstrations by such groups and noted that when criticized, these anti-liberal groups are defending the government from non-governmental organizations, which is a dangerous tendency for society. According to her, online outlets associated with Russia and Sputnik are receiving finances from the state budget, and it legitimizes similar groups. There is no consensus in Georgia among the state and non-state actors in relation to major challenges of the country.

In the end, Tamar Kintsurashvili talked about an “informational chaos” and noted that Russia is cultivating this climate in other countries as well. According to her, even some of the more experienced democracies cannot avoid it. Therefore, it is important to defend the information space, which is the responsibility of the state in the first place. It is also important that the media complies with ethical standards to ensure that the society maintains its trust towards it.

After the remarks, attendees were allowed to ask questions. Discussions were held around the following topics: to what extent are the political parties put under unequal conditions during the 2020 pre-election period? How does the increased political activities of anti-liberal groups affect the political processes in Georgia? What is the role of civil society in reducing polarization and radicalization?

During the discussions speakers once again focused on social networks as a means of cultivating polarization and radicalization. It was noted that financial transparency and the identification of financial sources for political content on social media is important, since it constitutes participation in the campaign. Limiting unauthentic behavior and activities focused on disorienting voters is no less important.

Another issue pointed out during the discussions refers to the advantageous position of the ruling party in comparison to other political parties. As the speakers noted, the ruling parties have always been in a more favorable position, however, the pandemic has further deepened this inequality in favor of the Georgian Dream party. As of today, it is true that active involvement of the state is important due to pandemic, but boundary between the state and the ruling party has become obscure and is not clearly demarked. What is more, the pre-election environment is not equal since Georgian Dream has incomparably more financial and administrative resource in addition to the access to state institutions.

The role of civil society was also highlighted, specifically, the importance of raising awareness about the civic responsibility of voting and the more active observer missions in the context of the 2020 elections. It was also noted that there have been attempts to establish an alternative civil society, for instance, to create an alternative to the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics led by the regulatory commission.

In the end, the speakers noted the role of the international community in the country's political process and in softening polarization between political actors.

Annex: Conference Agenda**Panel I: 2020 Parliamentary Elections Amid COVID-19**

June 17, 2020

3:00 PM	Opening Remarks, Professor Kornely Kakachia , Director of GIP
3:05 PM	Tamar Zhvania , Chairperson of the Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC)
3:15 PM	Giorgi Tsereteli , member of “European Georgia” and the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
3:25 PM	Mamuka Khazaradze , Chairperson of “Lelo for Georgia”
3:35 PM	Salome Samadashvili , member of “United National Movement”
4:20 PM	Discussion

Panel II: International Actors and Elections

July 1, 2020

4:00 PM	Opening Remarks, Professor Kornely Kakachia , Director of GIP
4:10 PM	H.E. Kelly Degnan , Ambassador of the United States to Georgia
4:20 PM	H.E. Justin McKenzie Smith , Ambassador of the UK to Georgia
4:30 PM	Viola Von Cramon , member of the European Parliament, “European Green Party”
4:40 PM	Christian Urse , the head of the Council of Europe Office in Georgia
4:50 PM	Discussion

Panel III: Polarization and Radicalization of Electorate

July 14, 2020

3:00 PM	Opening Remarks, Professor Kornely Kakachia , Director of GIP
3:05 PM	Tamar Chugoshvili , independent member of Parliament
3:15 PM	Shota Dighmelashvili , Co-founder of “Shame” Movement and Governance Monitoring Centre, Journalist, Executive Editor at Forbes Georgia
3:25 PM	Mikheil Benidze , representative of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)
3:35 PM	Tamar Kintsurashvili , Executive Director of Media Development Foundation (MDF)
3:45 PM	Discussion



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS