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Extreme Political Polarization: Implications for Georgian Democracy

The 2018 presidential election campaign and the subsequent political developments brought to the fore the extreme political polarization present in Georgia, a divide which has been steadily deepening ever since. Despite a pluralist and diverse media environment, both the [2018 presidential](#) and [2020 parliamentary](#) elections were characterized by negative campaigning, harsh rhetoric, and visible partisan bias of the country's private broadcasting channels – all of which made it difficult for voters to make an informed choice. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of its declining [democracy score](#), Georgia has witnessed repeated political crises, culminating with those opposition parties which crossed the electoral threshold neither recognizing the election results nor intending to participate in parliamentary activities unless snap elections were held. The current state of affairs is being defined by the parties as a zero-sum game with any compromise being perceived as a defeat. In such a polarized environment, people prioritize their own narrow interests over general democratic principles, thus undermining public checks on institutions and elected [politicians](#).

The only institution that still manages to bring both the opposition and the ruling party together for negotiations is the foreign diplomatic corps, and it has already organized several rounds of meetings between the parties concerned. During his visit to Tbilisi, the President of the European Council personally became involved in trying to help the parties find a solution to the ongoing political crisis, and appointed a special representative to engage with the process; this has provided a small glimpse of hope. However, as of the time of writing, the standoff between the parties continues to worsen, with the leading figure of the UNM (the largest opposition party) getting arrested and neither of the sides willing to compromise on any of the key issues.

At the invitation of the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), a selection of experts from the USA and Georgia have given their responses to the following two questions:

1. In your opinion, what are the potential risks for Georgian democracy, in case the status quo with the deep political polarization remains in place?
2. What would be the steps the parties, whether on the ruling side or the opposition, need to take, in order to mitigate current or future potential crises and start depolarization?



Professor Julie A. George, *Associate Professor, Graduate Center, Queens College*

The current balance of power in Georgian politics is, and often has been, tilted in the favor of a dominant ruling party. This long-term trend in Georgia, experienced by the CUG, the UNM, and now Georgian Dream, has contributed to a political atmosphere such that ruling parties can govern without many checks on their authority. This reality has hampered the emergence of a long-standing empowered opposition and true democratic accountability to the Georgian people. After all, empowered political competition provides a mechanism for voters to identify issues and interests important to them; without debate, there can be no informed accountability. Moreover, the system is brittle, because the population has no clear way to affect change in the current political environment. Yet the Georgian Dream electoral successes in 2012 and 2013, as well as the acquiescence of the United National Movement to the electoral will of the people, offered an alternative and stable path to power shifts and portended real democracy in Georgia. These advances are in jeopardy now. The democratic norms they reflected need protection.

Given the increase of documented troubles with the election, the Georgian government needs to take steps to depoliticize the electoral administration. Elections and expressions of partisanship should conform to both the rules and norms of democratic governance. The ruling party's responsibility to ensure fair play and to engage in restraint from using administrative resources to give itself an advantage is crucial to building democracy in Georgia. The public perceptions of Georgia's trajectory is increasingly pessimistic, a signal of distrust and uncertainty, as well as an alienation from their government. The political leadership can do much to lead by example: by working to ensure independence and political neutrality in the rule of law, in ensuring a free and open media landscape, and in building expectations of accountability to the people of Georgia.

Laura Thornton, *Director for Global Programmes, The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*



Georgian politics is stuck in a zero-sum mentality with the highest possible stakes. For the party that wins, it is full-on retribution – former government employees lose their jobs, political opponents must flee or face prison, everything is burned down to start anew.

This has created a system where the governing party cannot lose and thus must do everything they can to cling to power – abuse of state resources, judicial interference, intimidation, attacking civil society.

This public frustration with all of the country's political parties will create ripe opportunities for enemies of democracy – foreign and domestic – to gather popular support. Far right, xenophobic populist movements promising a break from “politics as usual,” social welfare benefits, and an easy list of enemies to blame (foreigners, LGBTQ community, ethnic and religious minorities) will gain momentum. Georgians will turn to the “strongman” leader blueprint to simply stop all the noise. This could manifest in different ways. Illiberal movements may compete in elections and win, and once in power start unwinding democracy (restrictions on civil society, media, opposition, etc.). In the background of all this is an enormously delighted Kremlin, which will support these efforts directly or through indirect disinformation campaigns and other hybrid activities.

While all parties bear responsibility for the current situation, the onus falls on the governing party to break the cycle, as they are in the position to do so. Some quick trust-building measures can start the process, such as releasing Nik Melia, stopping attacks on civil society organizations, and changing rhetoric, as well as fundamental changes to power structures such as the operation of the state security services. There is a need to address the systemic abuse of state resources and the dominating role of the Ivanishvili circle in public life.

Once GD makes its first peace-building steps, the opposition should take its seats in Parliament and acknowledge that while there were valid concerns about the elections (that must be addressed going forward), they did not alter the outcome. All political parties need revamping within. Georgian parties are not inclusive, not representative, and have been dominated by the same faces for too long. A new genre of leaders – which must include women, youth, and underrepresented groups – should take the reins of the parties. It is not only about leadership and candidate selection but also about internal decision-making – how policies are developed, internal elections held, day-to-day operations, and culture.



Dr. Lincoln Mitchell, *Political analyst, pundit and writer based in New York City and San Francisco*

I am not comfortable with using the term polarization to describe the current political conditions in Georgia. Polarization suggests deep divisions within society around issues, but in Georgia the situation is better understood as extreme partisanship where political questions, and indeed perceptions of political reality, are filtered through partisan sentiments, but where the substantive issues dividing the parties are not all that significant.

This does not mean the threat to Georgian democracy is not real. Replaying essentially the same election, with essentially the same result and the same partisan responses to those results every year or two, both weakens the social sinews that make democracy function and also pushes the political leadership more deeply into their respective political corners.

The reason to be hopeful despite all of this is that there is a lot of opportunity for compromise. In the short term, for example, a deal around releasing Nika Melia from jail and accelerating electoral reforms in exchange for the opposition entering Parliament could be made relatively easily if both sides act in good faith.

There are two important caveats here. Firstly, snap elections would only deepen the crisis because they would very likely lead to yet another Georgian Dream victory and yet another outraged response by the United National Movement – thus reinforcing the current crisis. Secondly, the major impediment to resolving this crisis is the ongoing presence of Bidzina Ivanishvili and Mikheil Saakashvili at the center of Georgian politics. As long as they continue to play such prominent – if behind the scenes – roles, every election will be seen as a clash between those two individuals and compromise, reducing partisanship or moving forward more generally will be very difficult.

Levan Tsutskiridze, *Executive Director, Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy*



The continuation of the deep polarization can only lead to one result: that of Georgia becoming a failed state again. This would be a tragic outcome of the years of efforts to create a functioning and democratic state, but it is in no way inevitable, given the debilitating effect that the crisis is having on the institutions of the state. The deep divisions within the political class undermine the general democratic fabric of the Georgian society. The call to “finish off” or “destroy” competing political parties have potential, and will lead the country to serious civil strife and even civil war, for no political party that has significant public support can be truly “destroyed” without grave consequences and civil confrontation. The militaristic rhetoric that political leaders often employ in an attempt to rally their die-hard supporters or to position themselves as true, “strong” leaders, may have truly tragic results for the country.

The current crisis shall be addressed by mutual concessions. The “red lines” of political parties should be redrawn, and they must be placed where the real national interests are, as opposed to partisan or personal ones. In the face of the current crisis in the country, this should come as a decision of political parties driven by self-interest and aimed at their political survival in the face of increasing public discontent with both the socio-economic and political status quo. For the long-run, a true consensus must be hammered out on the issues of the de-politicized justice and law enforcement systems, as well as the creation of a truly independent and effective electoral administration.



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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