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საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

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GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

The Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization founded in early 2011. GIP strives to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia. It also encourages public participation in civil society-building and developing democratic processes. Since December 2013 GIP is member of the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions.

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FORWARD

The Georgian Institute of Politics is delighted to present Compendium 2021, the latest of our annual collection of policy documents dedicated to Georgia's political processes, challenges, and prospects. The collection is intended to serve as an introduction to the **sixth annual conference #GEODEM2021** and a keynote for discussion within the frame of our major event. We hope that the Compendium will lead to interesting discussion. These policy documents and papers may be used as a resource by representatives of political circles as well as civil society, political experts, members of the academic community and other stakeholders involved in the country's democratic transformation.

Aftermath of the 2020 parliamentary elections have brought a breakthrough in the domestic political processes and will, presumably, have important long-term consequences for Georgia's democratic development as well as its future European perspective. The slamming of the CEC-endorsed election results by the major opposition parties, plus a parliamentary boycott, snowballed into a political crisis persisting for almost six months. It was only thanks to efforts by the EU and the USA that the crisis eventually de-escalated. These efforts made by Georgia's Western friends and most important strategic allies for the benefit of the country's political processes is an undeniable sign that the future of Georgia's democratization remains a priority in both Brussels and Washington.¹ At the same time, the personal engagement of Charles Michel,

President of the European Council and his special envoy, Christian Danielsson, in the interparty dialogue has sparked hope that European principles and compromise-based approaches may eventually find a way into Georgian political discourse. An interparty agreement may well signal this trend.

However, this process has once again corroborated that there is not yet a safeguard in place in Georgia to implement democratic processes smoothly. Political elites were not ready to independently lead a results-oriented dialogue, which is evidence of their political immaturity. At the same time, the ongoing crisis has challenged Georgia's prospects for European and democratic development with appeals for significant restrictions, or termination, of financial support to the country creeping into political circles. These appeals still loom over the country.² It is sad to note that these developments have unfolded against the backdrop of the ruling party's intent to prepare an official application for EU membership by 2024. However, so far, the country has failed to demonstrate a political culture which would be in line with democratic standards. Therefore, it is paramount that Georgian political parties distance themselves from a zero-sum mentality and opt for consensus-oriented politics.³

It is notable that the findings of various polls and surveys suggest that the parliamentary boycott lacks strong support among the country's population. According to the In-

¹ Panchulidze, E. & Youngs, Richard. *Defusing Georgia's Political Crisis: An EU Foreign Policy Success?* Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/05/10/defusing-georgia-s-political-crisis-eu-foreign-policy-success-pub-84494?fbclid=IwAR3n4VMFgDTsR2Nn1w1R04IeUg8Lmch0iNPsjslYdWCdAAsjZDfvOjTJ3fl>

² The First 100 Days of Georgian Dream Government: Reality and Challenges. Available at: <http://gip.ge/the-first-100-days-of-georgian-dream-government-reality-and-challenges/>

ternational Republican Institute, only 26% of the population back this process.⁴ At the same time, according to the findings of the CRRC polls, 82% of the population believe that all political parties should cooperate with each other.⁵ These findings suggest that there is a considerable mismatch between the ambitions of the political parties and the wishes of their constituencies. Even though there has been a growing trend for political parties to question the credibility of the methodology of public opinion polls,⁶ the findings nevertheless unequivocally point to the considerable gap between the political elites and the actual demands of the Georgian society.

As in the previous year, there has been a rollback in Georgia's democratic freedom as demonstrated by international indexes and reports.⁷ At the same time, international partners have also warned about threats of democratic backsliding. Even though the conduct of the 2020 parliamentary elections was generally assessed as transparent and fair by international observers, reports highlight such traditional flaws as the misuse of administrative resources for electoral purposes, bribery and intimidation of voters, polarized media environment and prevalence of hate speech in the pre-election discourse.⁸ The multiplicity of such challenges

and frequent questions about the legitimacy of elections results raises another question - why it has been so hard in the state of Georgia to conduct fair elections in line with international standards.

The commitment of the political parties to fulfilling the conditions of the Charles Michel agreement, especially those relating to core areas of electoral and judicial reforms, with integrity and honesty, creates an important way out of the deadlock in the process of democratization. Reorganization of the Central Election Commission in the runup to the upcoming local elections on the one hand, and the introduction of a fully proportional election system on the other, should lay the foundation for diversity within the country's party system and fair distribution of powers between political parties. In addition, the introduction of modern technologies to the election processes is likely to contribute to nurturing trust in the organisation of elections. The respective agencies should put a lot of thinking into developing technically sound and transparent voting systems featuring, especially, those digital mechanisms which can do most to enhance fair and legitimate election standards in the country. It is equally important to effectively modernize the judicial system and reduce the levels of concern about political justice, since a fair

³ Kakachia, Kornely & Lebanidze, Bidzina. 2021. *Op-Ed | Time to Push for Consensus-based Politics in Georgia*. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/402624>

⁴ Netgazeti.ge. 2021a. *ოპოზიციის პოპულუს 60% არ ეთანხმება – IRI-ის კვლევა*. Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/532290/?fbclid=IwAR2l1xjCqnw42kate4MgNEAd9mjCrQ5RnkicY1zwGvPm8xfEFYfotKe8tLs>

⁵ Caucasusbarometer.org. December 2020. *Do you agree or disagree – it is important for all political parties to collaborate with each other?* Caucasus Research Resource Centre. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nd2020ge/IMPAPCEO/>

⁶ Polling Wars in Georgia: Can it undermine public trust? Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <http://gip.ge/polling-wars-in-georgia-can-it-undermine-public-trust/>

⁷ Freedomhouse.org. 2021. Georgia. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2021>

⁸ Transparency.ge. 2020. *2020 წლის საპარლამენტო არჩევნების წინასაარჩევნო გარემოს ერთობლივი შეფასება*. Available at: <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/2020-clis-saparlameto-archevnebis-cinasaarchevno-garemos-ertoblivi-shepaseba>

and transparent judicial system constitutes an indisputably fundamental component of state-building.⁹

In addition, there are other issues which sometimes occur on the political agenda: emergence of new right-wing populist actors in party politics, against the backdrop of raucous debate between the mainstream parties, and heated intra- and interparty discussions. Nationalist and populist narratives have become increasingly prominent in civic and political life in Georgia. Therefore, both the wider public, as well as the political class, must start thinking about ways

to overcome these challenges.

This Compendium of policy documents, just like its predecessors, could not be published without the support of prominent institutes, including the National Endowment for Democracy. We are also indebted to the citizens of Georgia, representatives of civil society and media outlets for their continuous support for our work and their civic engagement in the development of civil society, as well as the strengthening of the organizational backbone of democratic institutions through their contribution to the development of democratic processes.

Dr. KORNELY KAKACHIA



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⁹ Erkvania, Tinatin & Lebanidze, Bidzina. 2021. *The Judiciary Reform in Georgia and its Significance for the Idea of European Integration*. Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <http://gip.ge/the-judiciary-reform-in-georgia-and-its-significance-for-the-idea-of-european-integration/>

**THE EUROPEAN UNION'S NEW
ROLE IN GEORGIA: SUCCESSFUL
MEDIATION AND A WAY AHEAD**

LEVAN KAKHISHVILI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Consolidation of democracy is a lengthy and turbulent process, in which political crises can be a recurrent phenomenon. For Georgia, aiming to apply for the membership in the European Union (EU) by 2024, it is politically costly to let crises become unmanageable. However, the current political crisis, which started in June 2019, entered a deadlock in February 2021 when the leader of the largest opposition party, Nika Melia was arrested. At this point, the EU took up a role of a mediator and negotiated a deal between Georgian political parties. This defused the situation and a part of the opposition agreed to enter the parliament. While the political crisis is far from over the EU has found a

way out of the deadlock. This policy paper explores the EU's successful mediation. The paper first contextualizes the Georgian crisis to provide some insights into why solving it was important for the EU and then explores determinants of mediation effectiveness. The paper argues that three factors were the key: high capacity of using leverage, adopted mediation strategy, and high degree of coherence as a mediator. Based on the findings, a set of recommendations is provided for various domestic actors and the EU.

Keywords: Georgia, EU mediation, democratization, political crisis, parliamentary boycott, conditionality.

INTRODUCTION

Political crises in Georgia are not unusual, but understanding and learning from these crises is the key for Georgia's success, especially if Tbilisi plans to apply for European Union (EU) membership by 2024. Therefore, this policy paper explores the latest political crisis in Georgia, in which the EU adopted the new role of mediator. The EU managed to drag the Georgian political elite out of a deadlock. Considering that the Union normally hesitates from interfering in domestic political affairs and had never done this before in Georgia, this paper aims to answer a few questions why did the EU adopt a new role and engage in the internal political crisis in Georgia? How did the EU manage to succeed? What should be the way forward for Georgia?

Although the EU's interest in the current crisis in Georgia is unprecedented, the country is used to external interventions in similar

contexts. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, this external actor was Russia; the last Russian involvement in a Georgian political crisis as was in 2003 and 2004 during the Rose Revolution and the ousting of Aslan Abashidze. However, since then Russia became a source of internal political crises in Georgia (see Kakachia et al 2017). The current crisis, the origins of which can be traced to June 2019, is a clear illustration (Kakhishvili 2019).

To understand the EU's new role in Georgia, this paper adopts Bergmann and Niemann's (2015) framework developed to evaluate the EU's effectiveness as a mediator in various conflicts, and identifies what goals the EU aimed to achieve. These are identified based on the content analysis of 59 news articles published by Civil Georgia between 24.02.2021 and 24.04.2021. The analysis focused on direct quotations from

speeches, statements, and letters of various MEPs and other EU officials. This analysis also identified what leverage the EU used to incentivize or coerce Georgian political elite to achieve a compromise; what mediation strategy the EU adopted; and how coherent the EU was across various institutions and member states.

The paper proceeds with a background section describing the anatomy of the current political crisis and how it is connected to

the June 2019 events. This is then followed with contextualization of the Georgian crisis in terms of what has been happening in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region and why the EU needed to engage. The next section deals with the determinants of the EU's success followed by a section discussing a way ahead for Georgia. The concluding section provides a package of recommendations for Georgian political parties, the president, CSOs, and the EU.

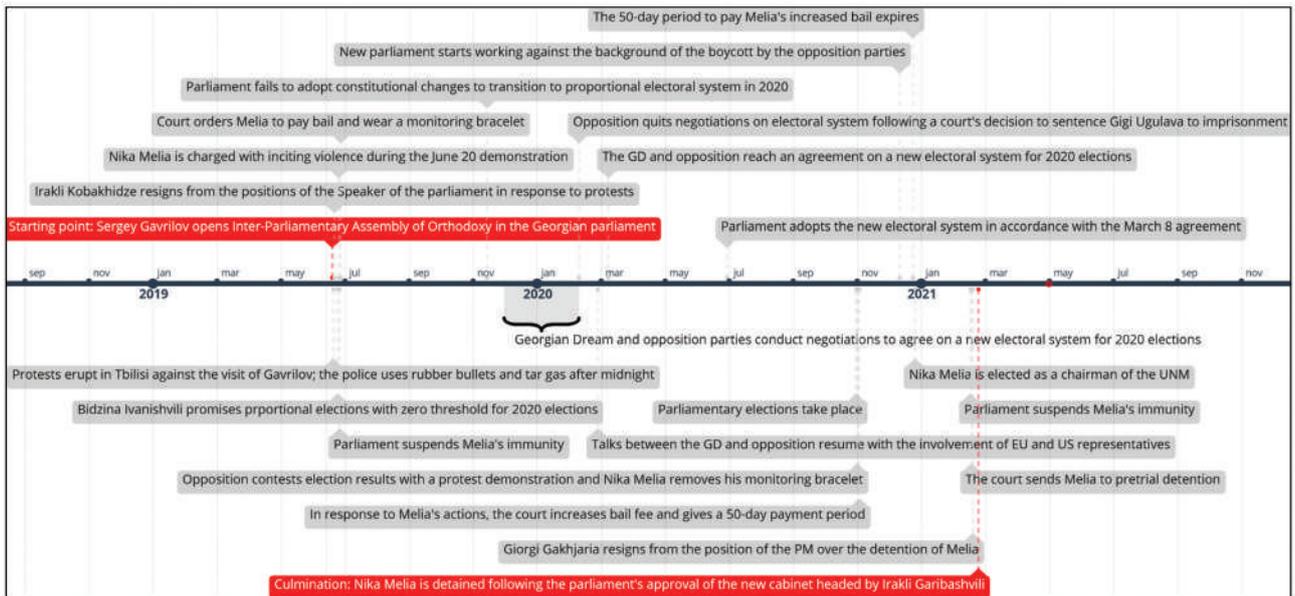
BACKGROUND: THE ANATOMY OF THE CRISIS

Effective crisis management is extremely important, especially in an EU-aspirant country. However, Georgia has failed to avoid negative consequences from an early stage of the current crisis (see Kakhishvili and Puslys 2019), which was triggered on June 20, 2019, when a Russian MP from the Communist Party, Sergei Gavrilov, addressed the delegates of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO) in Russian from the seat of the Speaker of the Georgian parliament (see Figure 1). This symbolic violation of Georgia's sovereignty sparked protests in Tbilisi resulting in clashes between the police and protesters. Although the protests were triggered by an issue related to Georgia's foreign affairs, the demands of the demonstrators quickly shifted to domestic matters (Kakhishvili and Puslys 2019). Apart

from the resignations of various political figures, one of the main demands was electoral reform – switching to a fully proportional system for the 2020 elections.

Consequently, the demands for reforming the electoral system became one of the two pillars of the subsequent political crisis. The second pillar of the crisis was the politicization of the judiciary. This was connected to figures such as Nika Rurua, Gigi Ugulava and Nika Melia. The latter was stripped of the immunity of an MP twice – in June 2019 and February 2021. Melia's imprisonment was the peak of the political crisis. This was the point when it became painfully apparent that Georgian political parties could no longer engage in a meaningful dialogue for the purpose of reaching a compromise-based consensus.

Figure 1. Timeline of the crisis: From the Gavrilov night to the arrest of Nika Melia



Source: Author's illustration.

This culmination was the reason why six MEPs, on the day of Melia's arrest, sent a letter to the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, asking him to "encourage Georgian political forces to seek an immediate renewal of the cross-party dialogue, which must lead to a concrete memorandum of understanding focused on nurturing a cooperative and inclusive political environment" (Civil Georgia 2021d). This letter included a warning for the Georgian political elite stating that the "political crisis risks

diverging Georgia from the path of reforms under the Association Agreement with the EU" (Civil Georgia 2021d).

On February 28, Charles Michel arrived in Tbilisi. This marked the transition from facilitation, conducted by the EU Delegation and U.S. Embassy, to mediation and the EU's new role. The mediation process was concluded with an agreement signed on April 19.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE GEORGIAN CRISIS: WHY DID THE EU ENGAGE?

The EU's engagement in Georgia's internal political crisis was unexpected. During the August War of 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy – in his capacity as the President of the European Council – facilitated communication between Tbilisi and Moscow and forged a ceasefire agreement between the two countries. Subsequently, the EU adopted the role of co-chair and mediator in the Geneva In-

ternational Discussions (Panchulidze 2020). Furthermore, the EU has extensive and successful experience in the Balkans as a mediator in international conflicts, peace talks, and domestic crises (Bergmann and Niemann 2015). The Balkan region directly borders EU member states: some of the Balkan countries are already members of the EU while the rest are on the path to membership. Article 21 of

the Treaty on European Union, which defines provisions for European External Action, sets the following top three goals: “(a) safeguard its [EU’s] values, fundamental interests, security, independence and integrity; (b) consolidate and support democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law; (c) preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security” (European Union 2012). The Union has repeatedly made their interest in Georgia and wider EaP region clear, therefore it is not surprising that the EU has adopted the role of a mediator in Georgia. Considering the context of what has been happening lately in the EaP countries, the EU’s engagement becomes even more logical. Three main developments can be identified in the EaP region to contextualize the Georgian crisis: unrest in Belarus; renewed war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh; and intensification of the warfare and subsequent build-up of Russian troops near the eastern borders of Ukraine.

The EU has failed to ensure peace and stability in all these developments, which threatens its interests. The elections and the following large-scale protests in Belarus have demonstrated vulnerabilities of the Alexander Lukashenko regime, as well as the limits of the EU influence (see Erlanger 2020). Lukashenko, who enjoys the possibility of external support from Russia, is not willing to give up power.

The so-called second Nagorno Karabakh war, has been another demonstration of the EU’s limited influence in the region. Only

Russia, with the support of Turkey managed to negotiate a peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan (BBC 2020), marking “a deep retreat in Europe’s ambition to be a regional actor” (Judah 2020). While Europe stood by, Russia increased its presence in South Caucasus by gaining the right to station about 2,000 peacekeepers in Azerbaijan (BBC 2020), which means that Moscow now has a military presence in all three South Caucasian countries.

The third development is related to Ukraine. Even though in 2020 a ceasefire deal was achieved between Kyiv and pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine (Reuters 2020), the agreement soon came under strain (BBC 2021a) while in March, Russia started building up its troops along the Russian-Ukrainian border, alarming NATO (BBC 2021c). Even though the Russian defense ministry stated that troops have been instructed to return to their permanent bases (BBC 2021b), this process too showed how limited the EU’s influence is when it comes to traditional tools of coercion.

Against this background, Georgian political parties’ unwillingness to compromise seems to be an easy problem to solve. These and, perhaps, other factors, e.g., President Michel’s personal background as a Belgian politician from a divided society closely familiar with political standoffs, could incentivize the EU to act where it can and strengthen its role in the eastern neighborhood. Therefore, keeping Georgia, a frontrunner of EaP, stable in an otherwise turbulent region became more important for the EU than ever before.

DISSECTING THE MEDIATION PROCESS: HOW DID THE EU MANAGE TO SUCCEED?

The EU's success in concluding the agreement is a first step in a long process of undertaking reforms to strengthen institutions in Georgia. However, evaluating mediation effectiveness is important to understand how the EU managed to deliver concrete results. Bergmann and Niemann (2015) conceptualize "mediation effectiveness" as goal attainment, i.e., to what extent the mediator was clear about the goals of the mediation process beforehand and to what extent these goals were achieved (Bergmann and Niemann 2015). Consequently, it is important to evaluate what goals the EU had set before the mediation process and what factors determined their attainment.

According to Bergmann and Niemann (2015), three factors characteristic to the mediator and mediator's strategy determine the outcome of mediation: mediator leverage, mediation strategy, and mediator coherence. The higher the mediator leverage the more effective the mediation will be. Considering that the EU's external relations

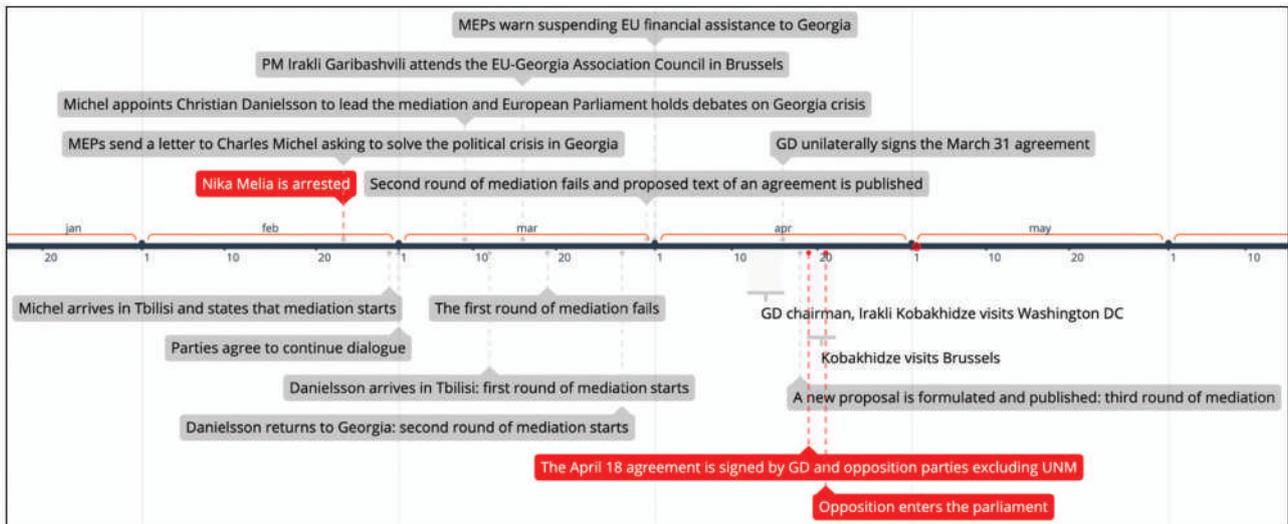
primarily rests on the principle of conditionality, the capacity to use positive or negative conditionality is high. The extent to which the EU is willing to use coercive measures is another matter. When it comes to mediation strategy, Bergmann and Niemann (2015) differentiate three types: facilitation, formulation, and manipulation. However, the latter is largely redundant because it is defined as the combination of formulation strategy and usage of positive and/or negative conditionality. Formulation, in its turn, is defined as a strategy during which the mediator not only makes communication easier for conflict parties – a facilitation strategy – but also formulates a concrete proposal of compromise. Consequently, formulation is viewed to be more effective than facilitation and the most effective if coupled with usage of leverage. Coherence, on the other hand, refers to the internal unity of the mediator. In this case, whether various EU institutions or member states send the same signals to the conflict parties. The higher the coherence, the more effective the EU mediation.

Goals of the EU Mediation

The effectiveness of the mediation process should be understood as opposed to the goals set in advance (see Figure 2 for the timeline of the mediation process). There are two aspects to such goals: ambitiousness

and clarity. In Georgia, the EU set an ambitious goal of solving the political crisis and put forward a range of both clear and vague goals.

Figure 2. Timeline of the EU mediation



Source: Author's illustration.

During his first visit, Charles Michel set a clear goal: “to solve this political crisis” (Civil Georgia 2021a). “Solving the crisis” here solely refers to the deadlock resulting from the radicalizing rhetoric of Georgian parties. At the same time, there were other less ambitious of representatives of the EU: to relaunch dialogue between the GD and the opposition; to stop polarizing rhetoric; and to sign a concrete memorandum of understanding between the parties. These goals were all voiced during or before Michel’s first visit. As a result of this visit, however, dialogue was relaunched, and the radicalizing behavior stopped from the side of the opposition parties. Illustration of the latter is the March 3 announcement of the opposition parties about suspending street protests to avoid disruption of “the talks resumed after

President Michel’s mediation” (Civil Georgia 2021e). The concrete memorandum was signed by mediation participants on April 19. There were other ambitious long-term goals that illuminate how the EU sees the Georgian political elite’s efforts; these are not to be fixed by the mediation process. Instead, the primary goals of the mediation process aimed to bring parties together to agree on the reforms agenda, but these were accompanied by additional, vague objectives. The clear goals can be grouped into three larger categories: electoral reform; judicial reform and the opposition’s role in the parliament. The vague goals can also be grouped into three categories: protection of Georgian citizens’ interests; protecting constitution and democratic principles; and finding common ground to achieve a consensus (see Table 1).

Table 1. Goals of EU mediation

Clear goals	Vague goals
Elections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform of the electoral system • Possible early elections 	Protection of the interests of the citizens of Georgia
Judiciary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform of the judicial system • Appointment of the Supreme Court judges • Two cases of politicized justice 	Protection of the constitution and democratic principles
Parliament <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power-sharing and opposition's oversight functions • Ending the boycott 	Finding a common ground to achieve a compromise-based consensus

Source: Author's analysis.

The clarity of the goals not only helps to evaluate the extent of the EU's effectiveness as a mediator but also provides an important insight into what issues the EU deems important. All the goals labeled as "clear" in this policy paper were put forward in the period between the arrest of Nika Melia and Charles Michel's decision to appoint Christian Danielsson as Envoy. These goals never

changed, and no new goals were added after March 9. This means that the EU was highly consistent in its actions and had a clear target from the earliest stage of its involvement. Considering that all these issues were included in the final document signed by the parties, excluding the UNM, it can be argued that the EU was effective as a mediator.

Determinants of Effectiveness: Leverage, Strategy, and Coherence

Based on the adopted analytical framework, the EU's mediation is the most effective if it formulates a concrete proposal, uses coercive measures and/or positive incentives, and shows overall unity in the mediation process – which the data suggests is what happened in the Georgian political crisis. Based on preliminary preparatory consultations, the EU did formulate a specific agreement text and redrafted it after the parties failed to reach a consensus. At the same time, this was coupled with a set of positive incentives and coercive measures with a high level of coherence from the side of the EU as a mediator.

The usage of leverage by the EU can be divided into two parts. The first covers the period before the second mediation round led by Christian Danielsson, while the second starts following the failure of the second mediation round. In the first period, usage of leverage is dominated by messages that are both positive and negative, but are rather general in their content. The positive incentives mostly included voicing the EU's support for Georgia's "prosperous future" as well as sovereignty and territorial integrity. An exception in terms of the generic nature of positive incentives came on March 9 when Josep Borrell, High Representative of

the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, alluded to the EU's financial support to Georgia: "We are helping Georgia, we are the largest donor in Georgia, we are allocating Georgia important support to face the coronavirus pandemic" (Civil Georgia 2021c). He went on to express hope that the process would result in a political agreement, thus tying the financial support with the outcome of mediation.

Meanwhile, negative messages remained limited to suggestions on how the political crisis "risks diverging Georgia from the path of reforms under the Association Agreement" (Civil Georgia 2021d) and "jeopardize[s] the country's stability and aspirations for Euro-Atlantic co-operation" (Civil Georgia 2021f). An exception was when an Estonian MEP from European People's Party suggested that the "EU must have strong leverage over Bidzina Ivanishvili" to prevent him from "leading from behind the curtains" (Civil Georgia 2021c).

Following the failure of Georgian parties to sign the proposed agreement, which was publicized on March 31, the EU adopted harsher language and discussed concrete measures. On April 1, seven MEPs from various political groups published a joint statement suggesting that "The future of

EU-Georgia relations is at stake", warning that "Following the refusal from the political parties to compromise, Georgia's leaders should not expect a return to business as usual from the European Union" (Civil Georgia 2021b). The MEPs additionally stated that there would be concrete consequences for Georgia "in terms of EU financial assistance, including both a suspension of further disbursements of and an increase in conditionality linked to EU Macro-Financial Assistance and budget support programmes" (Civil Georgia 2021b). This became the first time the EU warned about using a specific instrument as negative conditionality, which served as a repercussion of the actions of Georgian political leaders and, therefore, as a coercive measure.

All these positive and negative measures were used in tandem with the formulation mediation strategy, which suggests that the mediator should have a high degree of effectiveness. Furthermore, the EU was highly coherent, as demonstrated by the diversity of actors involved in mediation efforts (see Table 2). These actors never expressed messages that would undermine or oppose any other message from a different actor, which was helpful for getting the expectations across.

Table 2. EU-related actors and their roles throughout mediation

#	Actor	Role
1	EU Delegation to Georgia Represented by Carl Hartzell, EU Ambassador to Georgia	Facilitated talks before mediation started
2	European Council Represented by Charles Michel, President	Started mediation Appointed Christian Danielsson, in cooperation with High Representative Borrell, as an Envoy who acted as a mediator
3	European Union External Action Service Represented by Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy	Supported Charles Michel in his plan on mediation and appointment of Christian Danielsson Chaired EU-Georgia Association Council on March 16
4	European Parliament Represented by various MEPs from different political groups including most actively EPP, S&D, ECR, Greens/EFA, Renew Europe, etc.	Held debates on Georgia Several MEPs sent a public letter to Charles Michel Several MEPs made a joint statement
5	Member States Represented by Gabrielius Landsbergis, Foreign Minister of Lithuania	Planned to set up a mediator group composed of various EU foreign ministers

Source: Author's analysis.

The EU demonstrated a high degree of coherence internally, but the USA was also in line with the message box the EU used. The U.S. Embassy adopted a similar role to the EU Delegation, while U.S. Senators voiced the possibility of using negative conditionality in relation to the implementation of the agreement. Introduced on April 22, a bipartisan resolution in the U.S. Senate expressed concern that disrupting democratization

would “slow [Georgia’s] progress toward achieving its aspiration of Euro-Atlantic integration (...) and could result in conditions placed on U.S. assistance to Georgia” (Civil Georgia 2021g). Therefore the U.S. involvement was of additional significance, especially considering that the GD unilaterally signed the March 31 agreement on April 16 following the official visit of the GD Chairman, Irakli Kobakhidze, to Washington.

WHAT NEXT FOR GEORGIA?

It is a problem for Georgia that the political actors needed an external mediator for conducting a dialogue and achieving a compromised-based consensus. Georgian political parties should have had sufficient resources for a dialogue or another domestic actor, e.g., the president, should have been able to undertake the role of a mediator. Commentators of Georgian politics have warned against the challenges related to political forces seeing politics as a zero-sum game (Georgian Institute of Politics 2021) and advocated for consensus-based politics (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2021b), but it became apparent that domestically there was insufficient resources for a constructive dialogue. Although the EU managed to relaunch the constructive political process through its mediation, it does not mean that the change is either imminent or inevitable. If the GD's declared goal to apply for the EU membership by 2024 is feasible, Georgia will have to do its homework. The best indication of what is expected of Georgia is outlined in the April 18 agreement. Doing this homework is a shared responsibility of all political actors in Georgia.

One of the key challenges of the April 18 agreement is the fact that the UNM has not signed it, nor have the European Georgia and Labor parties. The latter two are smaller parties, while the UNM is the largest opposition party; therefore, the UNM's actions are more impactful. However, the document was signed by individual participants of the mediation process such as Salome Samadashvili and Davit Bakradze, although Bakradze had already left the European Georgia, while Samadashvili subsequently voiced her plans to quit the UNM.

The UNM's refusal to sign the agreement is part of the conflict context. In the political stand-off, the GD was one side while the other included a range of political parties with heterogeneous interests and expectations. It is usually more likely that within a disunited conflict party there will be one or more actors who will not agree to the formulated deal. Even in this situation, it does not seem that the UNM will be willing or able to remain outside the constructive political process. They are expected to enter Parliament. This can be concluded from two facts: Melia has allowed the EU to pay his bail and be released, and Saakashvili called on the UNM to sign the April 18 agreement following Melia's release (JAMnews 2021). Consequently, what is the most important for Georgia at this stage is implementing the April 18 agreement and developing consensus-based politics.

The agreement signed by most of the political parties has five sections: (1) addressing perceptions of politicized justice; (2) ambitious electoral reform; (3) rule of law/judicial reform; (4) power sharing in the parliament; (5) future elections (European Union External Action Service 2021). From these issues, the most long-lasting and impactful are the electoral and judicial reforms. These reforms are supposed to create stable institutions, promote public trust in the judiciary and elections. However, the agenda of reforms outlined in the agreement should not be viewed as an exhaustive list of actions Georgia needs to undertake; electoral reform is a clear illustration for this argument. The electoral reform as outlined in the April 18 agreement only focuses on the electoral system, i.e., how elections are conducted. Moving to proportional national elections

with a low barrier and decreasing the share of single-mandate districts in local elections are important steps. In a fully proportional system, coalition governments will eventually become a real possibility, which will force Georgian political parties to work together. Such developments will make it clear that winner-takes-all elections will no longer be a concern of smaller parties. To this end, the agreement is commendable for defining the directions of change of the electoral system. At the same time, an equally important aspect to electoral contestation is the pre-election environment. The extent to which all parties have relatively equal capacity is an important question. The balance between budgetary funding and private donations, access to media, ruling party's usage of administrative resources – these are some of the most pressing issues that legislation needs to address. However, on these issues, the April 18 document suggests following the joint opinion of the Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR (2021), which only

recommends to reconsider adoption of the amendments on party financing. Consequently, how Georgia manages to level the playing field between the government and the opposition remains to be seen.

Apart from the problems the agreement aims to solve, it also offers one important opportunity: “parties shall seek to establish a Jean Monnet Dialogue with the European Parliament” (European Union External Action Service 2021). The Jean Monnet Dialogue can become instrumental in building a consensual democracy in Georgia. This tool has already been successfully used in countries such as Ukraine, North Macedonia, and Serbia (Samkharadze 2021, Kakachia and Lebanidze 2021a). If the Georgian political elite remains divided and shows little capacity of constructive dialogue without outside interference, the Jean Monnet Dialogue will help the practice of responsible politics cementing the EU's new role as a mediator invested in Georgia's future.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the April 18 agreement is an important step in resolving the protracted political problems Georgia faces. The West will closely watch how the agreement is implemented. As these actors have demonstrated, they will not hesitate from using negative conditionality should they see fit. Therefore, the implementation of the agreement may become a condition for further financial assistance from Western partners. Additionally, the Georgian political elite should be aware

that implementation of this agreement will not be sufficient if Georgia plans to apply for EU membership by 2024. Secondly, the future of the country and how it is seen in the EU or the USA is a shared responsibility of all parties mandated by Georgian voters to make decisions influencing their daily lives.

Based on the analysis above, the paper presents the following recommendations:

To all political parties in Georgia

- Ensure that the April 18 agreement is implemented not only to the letter but also to the spirit. All parties should take their share of responsibility to this end.
- Engage in constructive negotiations in the format of a Jean Monnet Dialogue in order to nurture consensus-based politics.
- Refrain from using radicalizing language, i.e., portraying politics as a zero-sum game or opponents as enemies. This type of language contributes to frustration of voters and moves content-focused policy debates towards the bottom of the agenda of public discourse.

To the Georgian Dream

- Propose further reforms in two key areas: judiciary and electoral environment. The reforms should aim to level the playing field for all political parties in Georgia in order to restore public trust.
- Seek and follow the Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR recommendations when drafting bills related to changing the political and judicial environment in Georgia.
- Consult CSOs while drafting legislation, make the legislative process inclusive and transparent, and seek approval of CSOs to gain higher legitimacy.
- Seek consensus among various domestic stakeholders, i.e., opposition parties and CSOs, on systemic reforms instead of pushing ideas forward through brute force.
- Understand that power cannot be retained indefinitely. Therefore, implementing reforms to ensure level playing field for all political parties is a step towards ensuring that when inevitably GD will be in the opposition, it will enjoy the necessary institutional environment to return to power through winning elections.

To opposition parties

- Refrain from long-lasting boycotts of Parliament and respect the popular mandates received through elections. Boycotts can be effective, but quitting parliamentary politics limits the space for constructive and transparent policy debates.
- Focus on long-term goals such as changing the system that puts opposition parties at a disadvantage, for example, ensuring competitiveness

by reforming rules on party finances or access to media, and cementing judicial neutrality.

- Avoid antagonizing international

partners by refusing to engage in constructive political processes such as parliamentary work. This may lead to use of negative conditionality.

To the President of Georgia

- Proactively cultivate trust among opposition political parties to establish an image of the President of Georgia as an impartial arbiter.
- Act as an unbiased facilitator in case the ruling party and the opposition experience difficulties in communi-

cation.

- Assume the role of mediator in case of another deadlock by cultivating President Salome Zourabichvili's personal capacity as an experienced diplomat.

To Civil Society Organizations

- Monitor the implementation of the April 18 agreement and report findings to the public to ensure accountability of parties.
- Continue advocacy efforts and raise concerns with the EU Delegation

and/or other EU institutions if the implementation process is derailed.

- Continue advocating for systemic reforms to make elections and judiciary more trustworthy.

To the European Union

- Help Georgian political parties practice consensus-based politics through the Jean Monet Dialogue format.
- Keep acting as a mediator using a stick-and-carrot approach and formulation strategy of mediation.

- Maintain a high level of coherence across all institutions and member states in relation to how Georgia should advance its democracy though supporting an impartial judiciary and competitive elections.

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**WHY DO GEORGIAN POLITICAL
PARTIES STRUGGLE TO NEGOTIATE?
STRUCTURAL DISINCENTIVES TO
COMPROMISE-BASED POLITICS**

SALOME MINESASHVILI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recent political crisis following the contested election results of October 2020 drove both the opposition and the ruling party into a deadlock for several months, with respective displays of drastic demands and stiff resistance. The fact that they have gone through several rounds of meetings – albeit only with international facilitation – shows that both sides considered some type of agreement, at least ostensibly. However, the negotiations have on multiple occasions run into a dead-end, and only as a result of significant external pressure did the parties eventually sign the agreement, which came in the form of a document prepared and presented by a European Union representative.

Why did Georgian parties struggle to compromise and negotiate even in a context of mutual interest? This brief discusses structural disincentives to the conflicting parties, which accompanied by personal interests, lead to the failure of consensus-based politics. Such contextual factors include extreme political polarization, value underpinning of the conflict, political culture of personalized politics with strong and charismatic leaders, and historical experience of political persecution.

Key Words: Georgian political crisis, political parties, dialogue, compromise-based politics.

INTRODUCTION

Street politics has been a common feature of the past three decades in Georgia, and the 2020 political crisis can be considered another incident within this trend. A refusal of a coalition of opposition parties to accept the 2020 parliamentary election results threw the country into yet another series of confrontations. Despite international observers stating that they perceived the elections to have been legitimate, including the OSCE (2020), the Georgian opposition boycotted the parliament and took to the streets to protest the results. The situation further intensified in February 2021, when the UNM leader Nika Melia was arrested for refusing to pay bail over charges related to protests in 2019. The two rounds of negotiations, facilitated by EU mediator Christian Danielsson, proved unsuccessful. Despite coming together at the negotiating table, neither

side seemed willing to compromise over the key demands, including new elections and freeing those detained over politically-motivated charges. Meanwhile, this state of political turmoil was not only threatening Georgia's democratization process, but also damaging Georgia's reputation in the West, and the events became a potential threat to the country's long-sought integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Only after warnings that European and American officials were running out of patience, and when the EU decided to introduce the principle of conditionality towards Georgia due to its "high frustration", did the parties agree to compromise by signing the proposed document (Eurasianet 2021b). On April 20, first the Georgian Dream government signed the document after its official visited Washington, followed by several opposition parties.

However, this is just the beginning, and the parties still have to arrive at the agreed form of its implementation that has already stumbled over several drawbacks (Eurasianet 2021a).

Ultimately, it is the Georgian public that is a victim of the continuous instability and conflict in politics; it is they who are left under the pressing social and economic problems, which have further intensified as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Frustration with the parties is often also reflected in the public polls, where only 18% of Georgians say that they trust political parties (CRRC 2020b). In

terms of the recent crisis, in December 2020, a majority of Georgians (82%) stated that it is important for political parties to collaborate with each other (CRRC 2020c). So why do political parties find it so hard to engage in a consensus-based politics and rather struggle to negotiate? This brief discusses several contextual factors that make the dialogue difficult and inhibit compromises among political parties. For this purpose, the following sections discuss multiple disincentives to consensus-based politics in Georgia, starting from political polarization to the type of political conflict, political culture, and past experiences of power transition.

EXTREME POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Polarization and radicalization have been common characteristics of Georgian political life in the recent past, with a further increase during the 2019 protests (Freedom House 2020). Extreme polarization has been identified as a challenge to Georgia's democratization (DRI 2018; Silagadze and Gozalishvili 2019), which also creates a significant structural obstacle to the solution of political crises.

Georgia's political landscape is mainly divided between the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party and the United National Movement (UNM), a key opposition faction. A key feature of the political division in Georgia is that it revolves around personalities rather than opposing ideologies, since the parties are identified by their leaders rather than their programs. In fact, party programs and foreign policy priorities between the two parties are similar, both falling within the centrist position and prioritizing Euro-Atlantic integration. The Georgian pub-

lic is similarly unified in terms of ideology (most are socially conservative), key issues (socio-economic) as well as foreign policy direction (Euro-Atlantic integration). In the lack of issue partisanship, Georgians are not divided over policy or ideology, but rather "over partisan political events, politicians and the institutions they run" (CRRCa 2020). Instead of specific ideologies or policies, political parties build their legitimacy upon the flaws of their opponents, and instead of constructive debates over policy issues, they turn politics into personal attacks, while political discourse serves a demonization of the opposite side. The parties often try to discredit each other referring to its leaders as "oligarch" Ivanishvili from the GD and the "criminal" Saakashvili from the UNM. As a result of radical positions, the middle ground is shrinking, turning politics into a zero-sum-game and thus making any consensus extremely difficult. As there is no middle ground, any attempt to compromise is deemed treason. For instance, after

the 'The Citizens' party decided to leave the boycott and join Parliament in the beginning of February, the boycotting parties accused its leader, Aleko Elisashvili, of acting in accordance with the GD agenda (Radio Liberty 2021a).

The rhetoric during the post-election political crisis has been rich with polarized narratives. Both sides denounced the legitimacy of their opponents with negative image portrayals, by demonizing and declaring them as threats to the country and its stability, and blaming each other for acting in the enemy's (Russia's) interests. The GD representatives framed the crisis as radical attempts by the opposition to sabotage the state and blamed the UNM for hindering de-occupation efforts by representing Georgia as a country without unity (Civil.ge 2021b). GD representatives also called some opposition members "criminals" (Civil.ge 2021a) and "so-called politicians who are guilty of different heavy charges" (Radio Liberty 2021b), while Saakashvili's involvement in the process has been used to instill a fear of destabilization and potential revolution. Meanwhile, both sides blamed each other for playing into Russian interests by avoiding any compromise (Interpressnews 2021a). On the other hand, the opposition has put forward the narrative of themselves as Georgian patriots fighting against a pro-Russian government, and thus against a threat to the nation. Nika Melia, calling the government "Russia's

fifth column" (Interpressnews 2021b), has stated that party interests have nothing to do with the crisis, rather "the Georgian national movement is on the one side and the interests of occupants on the other" (Interpressnews 2021d).

In cases of extreme polarization, when an out-party is considered a threat to the nation, incumbent parties are more inclined to violate democratic rules, while opposition groups resort to extra-constitutional measures, including boycotts, protests, and quasi-revolutionary activity (McCoy, Rahman and Somer 2018). As a result, the latter no longer believes in democratic ways for removing the incumbent party, (ibid) which has been the case in Georgia. Extreme political polarization has not only been a facilitating factor in starting the crisis but also a huge obstacle to solving the conflict. The rivalry is so extreme that dialogue and consensus almost equals betrayal (DRI 2018). When opponents portray each other as a threat to the nation while the rivalry is also so much about personalities, coming together for a dialogue over a specific issue or a policy is extremely challenging. Those involved found it challenging to compromise, constrained by their own discourses as well as personal confrontations with the opposite side. Eventually, it was external pressure rather than their arrival at the agreement that compelled them to sign the document.

VALUE CONFLICT

Value conflicts based on people's beliefs and identities are more challenging to solve in comparison to resource conflicts (Harinck and Druckman 2017). In the context of a lack of clear ideological profiles and electoral

linkage (DRI 2018), Georgian parties refer to identities to discredit each other, further deepening the already existing extreme polarization. Blaming their opponents for being pro-Russian - an accusation frequently used

to demonize the other side – is often part of Georgia’s political exhibitionism, drawing a line between who identifies as European and who harks back to the Soviet mentality, and who also therefore cooperates with the Georgian enemy. Georgian opposition and the government have clashed over these blames since the beginning of the GD’s first victory. The opposition has complained that Georgia under the GD government has taken a Russia-friendly course and strongly lobbied for a resolution that established Georgia’s pro-Western course as a foreign policy priority. The so-called “Gavrilov’s night” in June 2019 was one of the most potent triggers for foregrounding identity-based narratives with its consequences spilling over into the 2020-21 political crisis. Russian Communist party member Sergei Gavrilov’s address to the delegates of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy from the Georgian Parliamentary Speaker’s chair was followed by a boycott from the Georgian opposition and a rally in front of the parliament building. This event was very much framed as the government inviting the Russian occupiers to take their seat in a prominent government chair, and interpreted as an expression of its pro-Russian sentiments, despite condemnation of the event by GD members as well and several resignations (Civil.ge 2019). The government’s decision to violently disperse the rally and arrest the opposition leader Nika Melia for leading the crowd into the parliament building has further contributed to the crisis. The latter case and Melia’s refusal to pay his bail fee has become a key factor in the recent political crisis.

This underlying identity-based difference has also crept into the discourse of the 2020-21 political crisis. Even before the elections, opposition representatives already noted that a GD victory would mean a victory of the Russian oligarchs in Georgia, abandoning the EU and NATO integration goals and entailing further appeasement of Russia (Tabula 2020). The opposition and the protesters alongside the demands of freeing Nika Melia drew parallels between the arrest and the Soviet occupation and have held banners “stop Putin’s dream”, “We don’t want a return to the Soviet Union” (Jam-News 2021; Politico 2021) and “freedom to Gavrilov’s personal prisoner” (Interpressnews 2021c). In response, the government has not only denied the accusations, emphasizing that they were the ones driving Georgia close to the EU through achieving visa liberalization and the DCFTA, but they also tried to play the pro-Russian card back by blaming the opposition for pouring into Russian interests by sabotaging the election results and holding protests in the streets (Interpressnews 2021a). It is not surprising that this identity-based framing of the conflict – divided between pro-Russian and backward versus pro-Western and progressive – makes the crisis even harder to overcome. Any compromise from the opposition might sound like a betrayal to its own identity and cooperation with “Russia-friendly” authorities, and the idea that government’s complete removal through new elections remains the only way to ensure “progressive” development of Georgia.

POLITICAL CULTURE AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

The political culture of personalized politics with a strong and charismatic leader stems from Georgia's Soviet heritage, and is indicated as one of the driving factors of political polarization in Georgia (DRI 2018) that also inhibits a compromise-based approach. Georgian society's inclination for charismatic leaders who also fit within the "father of the nation" idea (Chedia 2014) incrementally include the idea of a strong leader. 50% of Georgians think that the government should be like a parent, in comparison to 41% who state that a government is like an employee (CRRC 2020b). The effect of Soviet-style leadership is perhaps also responsible, and this striving for a leader with a strong hand also stands behind the fact that 45% of Georgians have a positive attitude towards Stalin (DW 2013). Within such a culture, every party perceives themselves as the exclusive owners of the truth. There is always difficulty in recognizing defeat and victory and governing factions rarely shy away from using strong responses towards the opposition, not to mention avoiding compromise. In fact, there are rarely any cases when Georgian authorities gave in to the protesters' demands, with the exception of Eduard Shevardnadze during the Rose Revolution. Even in the latter case, a complete loss of legitimacy and extreme external pressure were probably stronger drivers of the decision. Thus, in the context where the 2020 election results are recognized as being legitimate by Georgia's partners, the government not only considered compromise as a sign of a weakness but also used suppressive methods, such as the imprisonment of opposition members. Only strong external pressure for a dialogue drove the government and the opposition to finally sign the

agreement document.

In addition, Georgia's past experience of utterly annihilating the defeated political side in the context of the country's weak institutions has created a perception of "a political witch-hunt" (DRI 2018), which particularly leads the incumbents to fiercely resist any change that could lead to losing power. The UNM started its abrupt economic reforms and modernization process alongside the detaining and charging of former government officials with accusations of abusing power and illegally amassing fortunes. Some businessmen and former politicians who were affiliated with the Shevardnadze government were singled out for retribution (Rimple 2012). Similarly, the Georgian Dream government was accused of selective justice after the transition of power from the UNM in the 2012 elections. GD has instituted criminal proceedings against a number of former UNM ministers, as well as the former mayor of Tbilisi, and President Saakashvili after the end of his term in the name of "the restoration of justice". This movement has been criticized by Georgia's international partners as indulging in-politically motivated acts (Council of Europe 2014). Weak state institutions and a tight grip over the justice system usually allows an incumbent government to have an uninhabited free rein in attacking their opponents. Such an experience turns any crisis in Georgia into a zero-sum game where in any defeat, especially if a compromise is seen as such, loser not only loses their power but might also faces persecution. Therefore, every side will try their best to hold onto power or fight more fiercely to obtain it. This could also explain why the opposition insisted on new elec-

tions and a chance for a complete removal of the incumbents, while the government has

categorically prevented the possibility of hosting new elections.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Multiple contextual factors inhibit Georgian political parties from forming consensus-based politics, which is also intensified with mutual personal animosity between the ruling and opposition parties and their founders. Extreme polarization, wherein parties pursue personalized rather than issue-based politics, and further deepening of the political conflict over identity lines, coupled with a political culture of authoritative leaders and a fear of persecution after losing power, all act as disincentives to compromise and establish cooperation-based politics in Georgia. Such frequent clashes also lead the Georgian public to become further detached

from politics, since they have had enough of political crises and turmoil. It should not be surprising that only one in five Georgians trust political parties (CRRC 2020b) and they might lose interest in elections as a means of power transition considering how rare such cases are in Georgia. The Georgian public are rather more concerned about issues such as unemployment and poverty, while political parties continue to wrestle over their personal interests. Unless the latter manage to overcome the constraining factors to a dialogue and start acting in the public's interest, Georgia's democratic development will remain a mere hope.

For the ruling party:

- Take a more rigorous focus on the content of its activities, rather than continue accenting the "criminal past" of the UNM;
- Avoid negative language oriented on personalities – insulting or blaming specific party members;
- Evaluate the post-parliamentary election crisis thoroughly and prepare for the upcoming 2021 elections accordingly in order to avoid another political turmoil;
- Rethink the value of compromise in Georgian politics and continue working on further compromises to be fulfilled as promised;
- Ensure the fair power sharing while working on crucial reforms – Judiciary as well as electoral reforms - in the Parliament;
- Initiate and Implement reforms to strengthen independent institutions, e.g. judiciary.

For the opposition:

- Show a sign of will to cooperate while working on the reforms in the Parliament;
- Avoid negative language oriented on personalities – insulting or blaming specific party members;
- Pursue issue-oriented policies while working on reforms in the context of sharing the balance in the Parliament;
- Avoid an uncompromised de-legitimization of the political processes advanced by the ruling party in the name of “fraud elections”;
- Prepare a strong strategy to attract the electorate prior to the 2021 self-government elections based on the issue-based campaign.

For the European Union and the USA:

- Continue observing the inter-party relations, cooperation and fair power-sharing in the Parliament;
- Measure further perspectives of building the consensus-based political culture in Georgia and plan and follow the next activities accordingly;
- Use political conditionality more proactively both against the government and the opposition;
- Publicly discourage personalization of Georgian political discourse and negative language directed at individual representatives of parties;
- Publicly encourage issue-based campaigns and politics in both the government and the opposition.

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**RADICALIZATION OF GEORGIAN
PARTY POLITICS: IN SEARCH OF
LONG-TERM STABILITY**

BIDZINA LEBANIDZE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recent post-election crisis highlighted the role of political radicalization as a major challenge for Georgia's fragile democracy. Political radicalization in Georgia undermines the process of democratic consolidation and weakens state institutions in the country by contributing to mistrust among political actors, political disengagement of the electorate, polarization of political trust, and a general lack of political legitimacy. The polarization of political trust and a lack of political legitimacy of key state institutions – first of all, the judiciary and central election commission (CEC) leave the country without effective crisis mediating institutions which cannot be fully replaced by external mediation attempts leaving the country open for a permanent political crisis. This

policy brief argues that there are two broad long-term solutions to the radicalization of Georgian politics: institutional and societal. Institutionally, key actors who have a major role to play in political deescalation – courts and the CEC – should be institutionally reformed and have all of their inherent political bias removed. For the public, the image of these and other key state institutions should also be improved, as the perceptions of the country's society are equally important for the integrity of the electoral process and for overcoming political radicalization in Georgia.

Keywords: political radicalization, political trust, parties, consensus-based politics, democracy

INTRODUCTION

Political radicalization¹ has always been a part of Georgian politics, yet it acquired a new dimension and moved to the fore since the 2012 power change from the United National Movement (UNM) to the Georgian Dream party (GD). It peaked during the recent post-election crisis when opposing political parties failed to agree on 2020's election results, and it took six months of active international mediation to break the stalemate.

Next to causing an institutional gridlock, political radicalization also leads to the polarization of political trust, resulting in the decreased legitimacy of public institutions and disenchantment of the electorate from the political process. Therefore, overcoming

this will be crucial for Georgia's democratic consolidation and overall institutional efficiency. It will also be a litmus test for Georgia to improve its tarnished image and requalify as a pioneer country of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in the eyes of the European Union (EU) and international community.

The remainder of this policy brief explores the key features of political radicalization in Georgia, identifies its negative implications, establishes a connection between political radicalization and the polarization of political trust, and suggests ways to overcome the current political crisis. The brief concludes with recommendations for the Georgian government, the opposition, and international community.

MAIN FEATURES OF POLITICAL RADICALIZATION IN GEORGIA

Conceptually, the post-2012 political radicalization in Georgia can be placed between the two extreme types of hybrid regimes suggested by Thomas Carrothers: a 'dominant-power system' and 'feckless pluralism' (Carrothers 2002). Dominant-power systems are characterized by 'the blurring of the line between the state and the ruling party' (Ibid, 12) and are 'ruled by political forces that appear to have a long-term hold on power [...] and it is hard to imagine any of the existing opposition parties coming to power for many years to come' (Ibid, 13). Under feckless pluralism power rotates among 'genuinely different political groupings' by means of democratic elections but political elites are perceived as 'corrupt', 'self-interested,' 'ineffective' and detached from the electorate (Ibid, 10). Both types feature weak, underperforming state institutions, tenuous social and political reforms, and a disillusioned and politically-alienated electorate (Ibid).

Georgia's political system was sometimes considered to be a dominant-power system (Berglund 2014), but since the 2012 power transfer, the country moved more towards feckless pluralism, and since then represents a mix of both regime types. The ruling GD party commands significant state resources, but instead of coercion it mostly relies on co-optation, which still makes it less threatening compared to its predecessor. The political playing field is also skewed in favour of the ruling party, yet elections are competitive enough for the opposition to defeat the incumbent. All branches of power – including the judiciary – are at least partially politicized and dominated by the GD, yet a strong civil society, various grassroots movements,

formidable opposition parties, and Western pressure provide enough hedging to prevent authoritarian consolidation.

The defining feature of Georgia's political system since 2012, however, has been the political radicalization driven by two rival political groupings and their proxies: the ruling GD faction and the UNM, the electorally-largest opposition party, as well as the latter's splinter groups. The two opposing camps have been embroiled in a spiral of mutual hatred and demonization since the 2012 power change. Georgia's political radicalization has also spilled over to the media landscape and resulted in severe media polarization. The partisan editorial policies of key media outlets on both sidesⁱⁱ create parallel notions of truth, and build fertile ground for societal polarization. It is part of a strategy of the rivaling groupings to reach out to their supporters and the broader electorate through radical and non-compromising message-boxes (Kakabadze and Lebnidze 2021).

To summarize, the key features of political radicalizationⁱⁱⁱ in Georgia include, among others, permanent demonization and hate speech against political rivals, partisan and polarising editorial policies by mainstream media sources, negative election campaigning, and decreased and polarized political trust. Political radicalization is shaped by the dominant position of the ruling party, and has resulted in politicized public institutions with a salient opposition and civil society.

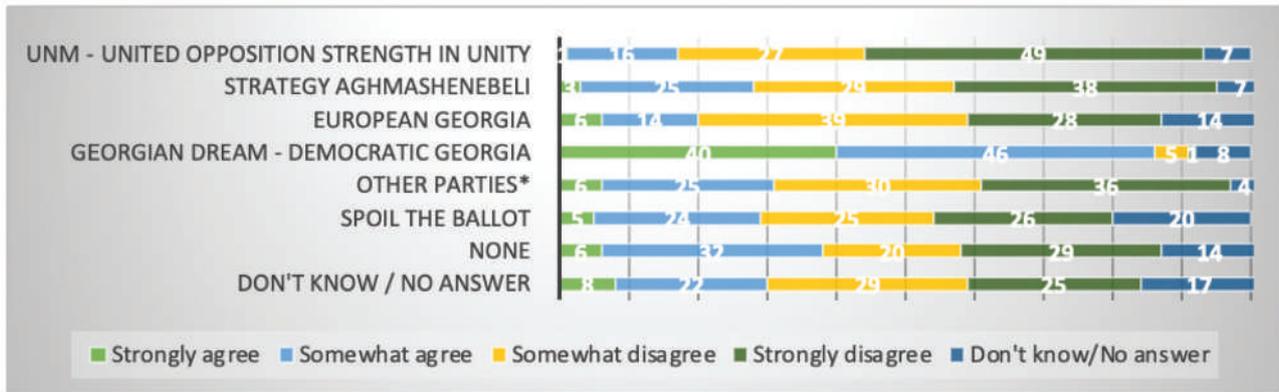
FROM POLITICAL RADICALIZATION TO POLARIZATION OF POLITICAL TRUST

Since 2012, Georgia's political radicalization has further exacerbated the problems of the country's democratization and overall development. Firstly, political radicalization makes playing by democratic rules harder, since it is always a matter of being 'all in' (Minesashvili 2021). Losing elections often amounts to political actors disappearing from the political scene entirely or even ending up behind the bars. In Georgia's post-Soviet context, wherein governments generally tend to overstay their welcome in power, this gives incumbents additional incentive to avoid power change at any cost. As a result, the democratic institutional design of the country suffers, as the incumbent regime attempts to retain its grip on key state institutions – most notably the courts and the electoral system – to prevent the victory of its competitors. Opposition parties, on the other hand, tend to reject the legitimacy of established political institutions by dismissing them as helping hands of the ruling party.

Secondly, political radicalization leads to the polarization of political trust along partisan lines (Hetherington and Rudolph 2018) and the diminished legitimacy of public institutions and political actors, including the political parties themselves. Political trust is

often considered as a social glue that holds the public together in a democratic setting, and gives legitimacy to political institutions to fulfil their functions. However, polarized trust 'inhibits the formation of public consensus on public policy because it reduces the willingness of citizens to sacrifice their ideological proclivities for the common good' (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015, 580). Political radicalization can further undermine positive expectations among citizens about procedural fairness in public institutions (Tyler 1997), honest and transparent governments (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005), and equitable distribution of resources (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005) – all of which are important ingredients of a high level of social and political trust. In the case of Georgia, the political legitimacy of state institutions has always been quite low due to various reasons, varying from their political bias to disfunctionality. However, political radicalization contributed to a more partisan reasoning among the electorate. For instance, recent public opinion polls indicate significant gaps between the supporters of the ruling party and the opposition in their assessments about performance of public institutions and other important political questions (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Do you agree or disagree that the Central Election Commission (CESKO) performs its work in a trustworthy manner? (Disaggregated by party preference)^{iv}

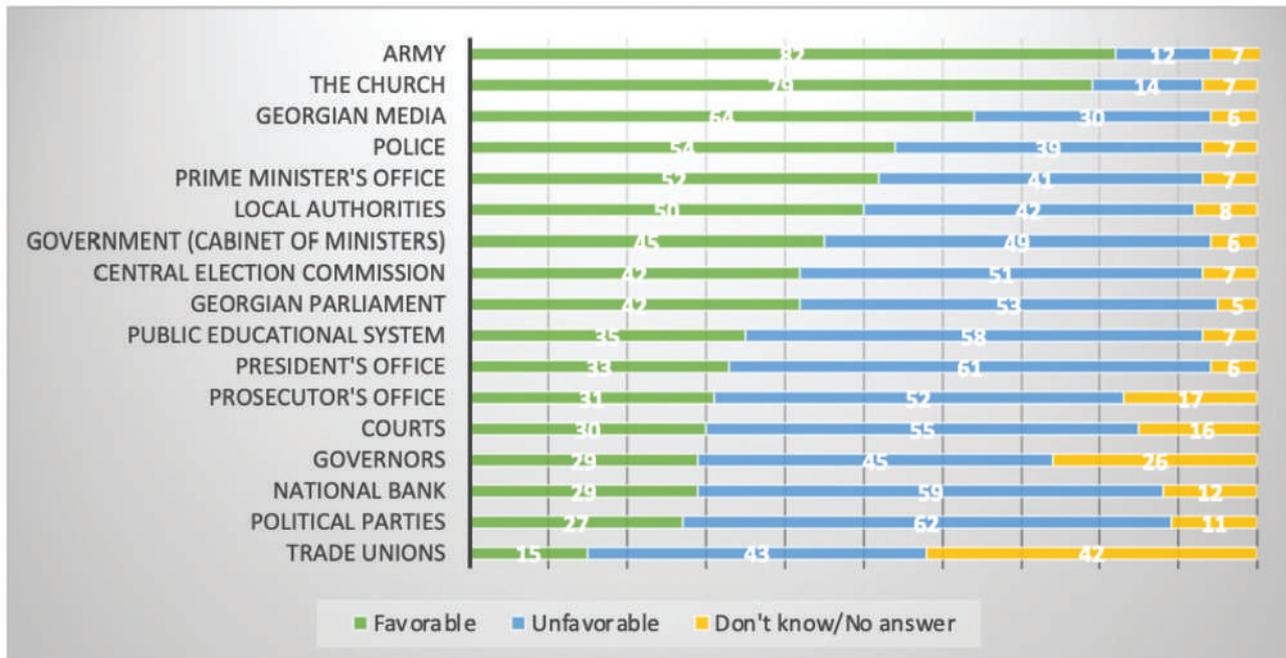


Source: IRI. 2021. "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia. February 2021." Accessed 05.05.2021. https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_february_2021_1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1mE0WyKgHFk9gYuohb9D4bCr8YcS7Dy10QjtnvKvojQ_dH-84W9ok6fztg. P. 43.

Thirdly, political radicalization also resulted in the detachment of political parties from their electorate's preferences and the supply-demand gap between parties and electorate has only increased over the years. For instance, according to the February 2021 polls, while the top five concerns of the Georgian population were comprised of socio-economic issues (IRI 2021, 10), the political agendas of Georgian parties were dominated by political infighting and personal enmities which did not interest the majority of the country's population.^v There is also a high mismatch in the preferences of the electorate in terms of politics and governance and what political parties actually deliver. While a majority of the population is supportive of the idea of coalition gov-

ernments and consensus-based governance in Georgian politics (NDI 2020, 55-56), political parties are still driven by a zero-sum game mentality and mutual demonization policies. Considering these mismatches, it is not overly surprising that the population distrusts political parties. According to one survey, political parties are the least favorable institution except trade unions (figure 2). Several surveys also indicate Georgia to have one of the highest percentage of undecided/protest-minded electorates in both the region and wider Europe (NDI 2020; IRI 2021). Interestingly, however, unlike many EU countries the protest voters have not yet gone in significant numbers to populist far-right or far-left parties.

Figure 2: Please tell me your opinion about the work of each of these institutions:



Source: IRI. 2021. "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia. February 2021." Accessed 05.05.2021. https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_february_2021_1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1mE0WyKgHfK9gYuohb9D4bCr8YcS7Dyl0QjtnvKvojQ_dH-84W9ok6fztg. P. 57.

Overall, the negative implications of political radicalization for Georgia's democratic development are manifold: it undermines and polarizes political trust in public institutions, makes the electorate disenchanted from political processes, undermines insti-

tutional reforms, demotivates the incumbent regime to play by democratic rules, and even leads to the rejection of established political and social orders by some political stakeholders.

FROM POLITICAL RADICALIZATION TO CONSENSUS-BASED POLITICS

While the recent EU mediation provided a workable solution in the short term by somewhat defusing the political radicalization (Samkharadze 2021), internationally-mediated crisis-management with a focus on short-term outcomes will be unsustainable. Instead, the international community and local stakeholders should work together to create conditions for a long-term strategy

for political radicalization to be replaced by cooperative and consensus-based politics (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2021). Broadly speaking, there are two long-term solutions to this problem, one of which is institutional, the other societal. Institutionally, key actors who have a major role to play in political deescalation – such as the courts and CEC – should be adequately reformed and erase

political bias by increasing their transparency, inclusiveness and accountability.

Doing so will also contribute to the depolarization of political trust and increasing the legitimacy of public institutions, which is as important as any institutional reforms themselves. Building confidence in elections, and in the political process more generally, 'is about more than ensuring compliance with legal obligations, or the effective performance of the electoral management body, or the absence of electoral malpractice' (Kofi Annan Foundation 2012, 5). The social acceptance of public institutions among the governed population 'leads to voluntary compliance and cooperation' from the side of the population (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018). For this to happen, both government and opposition parties should take action. The government should depoliticize key public institutions and, in response, the opposition should display more cooperative behavior.

The problem of enforcing reforms can be solved by the EU claiming the role of guardian of the reform process. Having significant leverage over Georgia, the EU, together with the US, is well-positioned to push the Georgian authorities by using a mix of positive and negative reinforcements into a genuine reform process, and to simultaneously force the opposition parties into more cooperative behavior. Despite the EU's aversion to conditionality-based approaches, the Union recently started moving in this direction (Kakhishvili forthcoming) but more needs to be done to turn the current political breakthrough in Georgia into a genuine process of democratic consolidation (Panchulidze and Youngs 2021). For this to happen, the EU and the US are advised to institutionalize the conditionality-based approach in their broader strategy and to more clearly delineate parameters of reform benchmarks in their documents and progress reports.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, while Georgia's democratic consolidation was stuck in limbo for a long time, political radicalization added another negative layer and derailed Georgia's progress, which was expected to accelerate after the 2012 electoral power change. Political radicalization also undermines institutional effectiveness in the country and leads to polar-

ization of political trust. Overcoming these challenges will be of paramount importance for Georgia's overall development, but also for its Euro-Atlantic prospects. Below, this brief provides a number of policy recommendations on how different stakeholders, including the parties themselves, can contribute to this task.

To the Georgian government and political parties:

- Georgian political parties should pay more attention to the widening gap between their agendas and the electorate's preferences, and engage more in issue-based discussions in order to avoid alienation from the voters;
- In close coordination with the broader public and civil society, politically neutral public figures should be appointed in key positions in the CEC and other institutions which are supposed to refrain from political bias;
- The government should ensure that

the judiciary undergoes a fundamental reform and erases clan corporatism, according to the recommendations of the Venice Commission and other international stakeholders;

- Next to judicial reform, political parties should work in close coordination with international and local stakeholders on additional legislative mechanisms to avoid politically-motivated personnel procurement policies in public services and to avoid the unjust persecution of representatives of former governments.

To the EU, the US and the international community:

- In coordination with and based on assessments by the Venice Commission and other international stakeholders, Europe and America should propose a long-term reform package in the areas of the judiciary and elections with clear benchmarks, and make further progress in EU-Georgia relations on their

fulfillment;

- Threaten political parties to reduce high-level contacts and to cut the associate membership to European party families if they continue with radical political agendas and do not engage in cooperative, consensus-based politics;

- Reward consensus-ready, constructive parties with intensified linkages, high-level contacts and, possibly, an invitation to associate membership in EU party families;
- Propose new formats of political consensus-seeking, including the Jean-Monnet format,^{vi} but introduce also a broader format of societal dialogue with participation of non-party actors (NGOs, CSOs, unions);

ⁱ According to McCauley and Moskalenko, “[p]olitical radicalisation of individuals, groups and mass publics occurs in a trajectory of action and reaction, and the end of the trajectory can seldom be controlled by either side alone. Radicalisation emerges in a relationship, in the friction of intergroup competition and conflict that heats both sides” (2011, 223).

ⁱⁱ The most notable examples of partisan media coverage deliver TV Mtavari (close to UNM) and TV Imedi (close to GD).

ⁱⁱⁱ According to some authors, political radicalization needs to be distinguished from societal polarization since the former mostly refers to extreme political partisanship and does not necessarily include deep divisions within a society. See the comment by Lincoln Mitchell in: GIP. 2021. Extreme Political Polarization: Implications for Georgian Democracy. <http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GIP-Expert-comment-16-1.pdf>. P. 4.

^{iv} “Other parties” includes parties selected by fewer than 3 percent of respondents: Citizens, United Georgia, For Justice, Republican.

^v For instance, according to the recent IRI survey, only 26% of surveyed population „definitely“ or „somewhat“ supported „the opposition’s decision to boycott entering the Parliament“ (IRI 2021, 34) which was the main political event in the country for the last six month.

^{vi} On Jean-Monnet dialogue format see: Samkharadze, Nino. 2021. “Jean Monnet European Dialogue – Next Step towards Consensus-Oriented Politics.” Georgian Institute of Politics. <http://gip.ge/jean-monnet-european-dialogue-next-step-towards-consensus-oriented-politics/>.

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**QUEST FOR CREDIBLE ELECTIONS IN
GEORGIA: IS “E” THE ANSWER?**

SHOTA KAKABADZE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper discusses the idea of employing internet voting in elections in Georgia and all the advantages and disadvantages this offers. It engages with detailed analysis of the Estonian case as the only country that has been using E-voting nationwide for fifteen years, and then discusses its application in the Georgian context. Considering all the advantages internet voting offers (boosting non-resident voter turnout, increasing participation of multiple socio-demographic groups, as well as making it easier for citizens living on the other side of the occupa-

tion line) the authorities need to start working in this direction as its implementation in Georgia may fix many key issues. However, before E-voting is introduced, there are several major challenges that need to be addressed: internet penetration and computer literacy remain quite low in the rural areas of the country. Furthermore, substantial work needs to be done to increase trust in the system.

Key words: Georgia, Estonia, E-Voting, Elections, Trust, Voter Turnout.

INTRODUCTION

Internet voting is being partially used in some countries (Australia, Norway, Switzerland, Canada), while Estonia has been allowing nationwide application of this method for last fifteen years. The case of the latter is the focus of this paper and is discussed in detail as the Baltic states have always been a role model, and in many instances have actually assisted Georgia with economic reforms (Radio Free Europe 2007) or with responses to Russian cyber warfare (Kirk 2008). Internet voting could be another project to be successfully implemented following the example set by this Baltic state.

Implementation of modern technology in the election process is especially important for emerging democracies like Georgia, where elections have been haunted by constant distrust from the losing side for last 30 years since its independence. The latest parliamentary election, in 2020, and the subse-

quent political crisis, was no exception to this rule. This policy paper aims to suggest one way to address this long-standing challenge by limiting the human factor and introducing electronic voting (E-voting). This work engages in cost-benefit analysis of the application of internet voting in the Georgian context. It is examining pros and cons of the introduction of E-voting, potential challenges Georgia could face, and how to address those obstacles, as well as the overall benefits of internet voting for further strengthening the fragile Georgian democracy.

In the first part, this paper examines how Estonia has benefited from E-voting and the advantages it has offered. Next, it moves to the mechanisms of internet voting - i.e. how it work in practice - then discusses the case of Georgia and ends with recommendations for the actors involved.

WHY ESTONIAN EXPERIENCE OF E-VOTING MATTERS FOR GEORGIA?

Estonia is known for its advanced digital society. Already in 1996 E-banking services were developed, which contributed to the embrace of E-solutions and the later use of IDs (e-estonia n.d.). By the year 2000 the country had online government E-cabinet meetings and online tax declarations. Currently, 99% of residents of Estonia (including foreigners) hold ID cards with microchips and 70% use them regularly to get various services online (ibid). Internet voting was first introduced in Estonia in 2005 and the share of voters opting for this option was only 2 percent. However, in the latest parliamentary elections (2019) it grew to 27%

(Valimised “Statistics about...” n.d.). Interestingly, the share of E-voters in the turnout in the latest parliamentary elections was 43,8% (ibid) highlighting the attractiveness of internet voting. On the other hand, what needs to be noted is that although the introduction of this internet voting option has not affected the overall turnout, it had a significant impact on Estonians voting from abroad (Valimised n.d.). As will be discussed in the next section, this trend makes it quite attractive in the Georgian context - easing voting for thousands of Georgians living abroad or students residing in Tbilisi, but registered in other towns and villages.

Process of E-voting

In order to use the internet voting option, a voter must have an ID card issued together with pin codes, the ID program in the computer and a card reader. They are similar to the one currently being issued in Georgia and used for getting various services from the state. For instance, to get a free parking permit near your residence in Tbilisi you need to log in with your ID and pin codes. Afterwards, the voter will need to download the voter application. There are guidelines available on how to verify the authenticity of the page as well as the application which is being downloaded. Once the voter application is downloaded, the voter logs in with the pin code 1 and proceeds to the list of the parties to vote for. The application also offers options to see the names of party candidates or to use search option to find specific names in the list. Once the voter makes a choice, she/he will need to confirm it with a digital signature i.e. pin code 2. After the process is complete, a QR code appears on the computer screen that allows the voter to check whether the vote was delivered to the server and the choice recorded correctly.

There are several mechanisms in the system that ensure that the voters express their will freely and are not being coerced. Not only that the voter can choose a suitable time or date to vote, but also he/she has an option to change the vote later. Furthermore, the voter could go to a polling station and cast a paper vote, which will automatically annul the earlier internet vote. Additional privacy measures include encryption of internet votes in such a way that it is not possible to see for whom the voter voted, as the system separates between personal data and the votes given. The votes cast via the internet are opened only during counting with a secret key, access to which is given to the members of the election committee, and more than half of them have to be present in order to open the votes (Valimised n.d.b).

APPLICATION OF E-VOTING IN GEORGIA: POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

At the 5th Annual Democracy Conference organized by the Georgian Institute of Politics, the head of the Central Election Commission of Georgia, Tamar Zhvania, remarked that, based on other countries' experiences, there were no plans to fundamentally change anything in the methods of voting. Online platforms were developed only for technical issues, be it either double-checking voter lists or registering observer missions and other commissions (5th Annual Democracy Conference 2020, 4-5). However, at the moment in Georgia, ID card technology is used for various government services. The Minister of Justice has mentioned on several occasions that technologically Georgia is ready

to allow internet voting, yet some legislative measures - popularization of ID cards and increasing penetration of the internet - were still needed (IPN 2015; Khatchapuridze 2016). If this is indeed the case, that technologically Georgia is ready to include E-voting as an option for voters, the **authorities need to start working in this direction as soon as possible considering the following advantages it could offer: boosting turnout of citizens of Georgia living abroad, and in the occupied territories or students living far from their place of registration, as well as facilitating the more active participation of ethnic minorities.**

Effects on voter turnout and participation

As was mentioned in the introduction, internet voting was first introduced in Estonia in 2005 and has been becoming increasingly popular ever since. Turnout in the parliamentary elections in Estonia has been consistently just above 60%, however, the number that has been growing is the portion of the votes cast via the internet. In 2007, the first parliamentary elections since the introduction of E-voting, the share was 3,4% out of all the eligible voters. This number grew to 27,9% in the latest parliamentary elections (2019). When calculated percentages from the turnout the number is 5,5% and 43,8% for 2007 and 2019 respectively (Valimised, n.d.c).

For Georgia, turnout for the parliamentary elections is not that low either. Despite the COVID-19 crisis, in the first round of the last parliamentary elections (2020) the turnout

was 56,11% (CESKO "Elections 2020" 2020). However, the turnout of the voters abroad was only 18,5% - that is about three times less (ibid). There are two ways specific to the Georgian context in which the E-voting could possibly increase voter turnout.

First of all, it could positively affect **participation of young people and students**. Most university goers in Georgia live in Tbilisi but are registered in different municipalities all across the country. Thus, in order to vote, they need to travel to their place of registration, which they might not be able to do due to work commitments, distances being too long to travel for one day, or simply being lazy. As studies have shown, costs related to reaching the polling station play a bigger role in whether a person is going to vote or not, in comparison to the costs related to acquiring necessary information for making

an informed choice (Blais et al. 2019). Voting via the internet from one's own personal computer, on the other hand, eliminates an obstacle to voting as there will be no need to travel just for one day.

Similarly, participation in the elections and thus the exercise of their fundamental democratic right is considerably limited for **Georgians living abroad**. In order to vote, they need to travel to the cities where the embassies or consulates are located, which could explain such a big difference between the voter turnout in Georgia and abroad (~56% and ~18% respectively). Either they are not

able to afford a day off to travel and vote or do not feel passionate enough about any political party or any issue to go to the trouble. Introduction of internet voting on the other hand, has the potential to considerably increase access to voting for Georgian citizens living abroad.

Last but not least, the **Coronavirus pandemic further tilted the balance in favor of distant voting**. The spread of the virus is indeed an obstacle to voters showing up at the polling station - internet voting can be done even in the middle of full nationwide lockdown or by the patient from a hospital bed.

Boosting political participation of ethnic minorities and those living in the occupied territories

The case of Estonia illustrated one interesting trend that could be very beneficial in the case of Georgia. Studies suggest that the technology enables increased political participation. Internet voting bridges societal divisions and eases political participation, even of those with fewer resources (less connected to modern technology) or those who are simply not voting because of the inconveniences of paper voting (Vassil et al. 2016, 458). Furthermore, studies indicate that after several cycles of elections when internet voting was used, the disparity between ethnic and non-ethnic Estonians voting online has totally disappeared (ibid, 456). Thus, **E-voting could be an important step in addressing the issue of ethnic minorities in Georgia** being disfranchised from political life. As well it could, to a certain degree,

decrease the constant controversies around polling stations in the regions populated by Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities.

Additionally, what is especially relevant for Georgia is the possibility of voting from home for **Georgian citizens living on the other side of the occupation line**. In other words, people living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia do not need to put themselves in danger trying to cross the dividing line to exercise their fundamental human right. One more implication, if this practice is established, is the increased popularity and trust in E-services. Thus, by broadening state services, citizens of Georgia living on the other side of the occupation line will be able to vote without leaving their homes.

Lack of trust and its implications

Despite all the advantages and benefits internet voting has to offer, there are several major challenges and cons that policymakers and the Election Administration of Georgia (CEC) will need to overcome in order to successfully apply E-voting in the Georgian context. One of the first issues that need to be addressed is **the lack of trust not only in the system but also in state institutions**. Another obstacle to the full implementation of the internet voting option is the **lack of internet penetration and computer illiteracy**. This section of the paper discusses these challenges in detail and, in the concluding part, provides certain recommendation to address them.

Studies show that one of the key factors facilitating internet voting is trust in the system (Trechsel and Vassil 2011 cited in Vassil et al. 2016). Study of a case of Finland, which allowed postal voting for its non-resident voters, illustrated that while voters extremely distrustful of this mode of casting the ballot were unaffected, medium-trusting voters living abroad began using postal voting if the nearest polling station was more than 100 km. away, while high-trust voters adopted this method even if the polling station was within a range of 10-30 km. (Nemčok and Peltoniemi 2021).

Considering the general low level of trust in state institutions in Georgia (trust in the executive government in 2019 stood at 21%, for the parliament at 15%, while for the political parties just 8% (Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset 2019)) as well as the contesting of official election results by the opposition parties every time, this just might prove to be the greatest challenge for the authorities. Transparency and communication

strategies to convey as much detailed information about the mechanisms of internet voting to the wider public as possible could be the way to considerably mitigate this problem. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that while trust is an important factor at the beginning, after several elections where internet voting was enabled, the need for its powers diminished. (Vassil et al. 2016, 456).

The mode of internet voting that is analyzed in this policy paper is also known in the literature as REV (remote electronic voting). It permits voters to cast their vote from an unsupervised environment (from any place outside the polling station). This implies that there is a high risk of voter coercion as the vote is cast in an uncontrolled environment (Gibson et al. 2016). However, the possibility of changing your vote cast online at any time prior to the election day, as well as an option of casting a paper ballot at the polling station and thus annulling the internet vote cast before, are some ways of ensuring voters' choice is expressed freely and protected against external influence. Additional mechanisms that include separation of the vote cast and personal information, as well as a possibility of checking if votes were delivered and registered correctly on the server facilitates, increase trust in the system.

However, privacy in this system still largely depends on the level of trust in the device from which the vote is cast (ibid). Whether there is malware on the primary device used for voting, or whether the internet connection is secure, remain some of the many potential problems internet voting faces. and relates to another challenge connected with computer literacy and access to the internet.

Computer literacy and access to the internet as a major stumbling block

Another major challenge that the Georgian authorities will need to overcome is increasing computer literacy and access to the internet. According to a report published by the Institute of Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) in 2020, in 2018 Georgia with 63%, along with Ukraine, scored the worst among the Eastern Partnership countries in terms of internet accessibility (IDFI “internet usage and accessibility...” 2020). Internet penetration, according to the same study, is really high in Tbilisi (125%) and Adjara (124%), while in other regions it remains quite low. In Guria it is 33%, while in Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti internet penetration is no more than 15%. Interestingly, regions which are populated by ethnic minorities are better connected – Kvemo Kartli scores 76% and Samtskhe-Javakheti 59%. In comparison, internet penetration in Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti is around 41%, Shida Kartli around 51% etc. Similarly, national computer ownership is at 62%, 74% of which is in the urban population (ibid, 5). The IDFI report also includes Geostat data from 2019, according to which 46% of population has no basic knowledge of the computer (ibid, 6).

Those numbers point to the challenge that needs to be addressed before all the benefits of E-voting can be materialized. What the study of the case of Estonia suggests is that the potential enabling effect of internet voting - i.e. considerably increasing participation of multiple socio-demographic groups - takes at least three elections to take place (Vassil et al. 2016, 459). However, the same authors also note that, considering that internet voting in Estonia was introduced in 2005, and since then the level of internet penetration, the use of social media and technology has increased so dramatically that widespread acceptance of E-voting may take considerably less time than three elections (ibid).

Last but not least, **scepticism towards new ID cards and their application**, especially from conservative religious groups (Netgazeti 2013) needs attention from the policymakers. Special campaigns and programs need to be developed in order to better communicate the mechanisms behind the new identification cards and to address fears among this sector of the population.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For several years, the Georgian political scene has been haunted by constant distrust and challenges to the election outcomes, with the latest parliamentary election being no exception to this rule. Removal of human factor and allowing citizens to cast their vote online from their personal computer, as well as giving them an opportunity to check whether their votes were delivered and cor-

rectly recorded in the server, could positively affect the level of trust in the election results. Furthermore, E-voting facilitates participation of non-resident voters i.e. citizens living abroad or far from their places of registration. Internet voting can also considerably ease the process for Georgians living in the occupied territories. Another positive side-effect of this move could be increasing

trust in E-services in general and mitigating distrust in new IDs among religious conservative groups in Georgia.

However, the introduction of internet voting still faces several major challenges and stumbling blocks. In order to take full advantage of the benefits that are being offered by the implementation of E-voting, they need to be addressed as soon as possible. First of

all, trust in the system of internet voting and application for connecting ID card to the computer needs to be high. Furthermore, internet penetration in the rural areas remains extremely low and the state has to start investing more in this infrastructure.

This policy paper proposes the following recommendations to facilitate the application of internet voting in Georgia.

To the government of Georgia and the CEC

- Start conducting studies to assess the readiness of the E-infrastructure and software for the introduction E-voting
- Initiate special campaigns to speed up the process of replacing old identity cards with new ones. Furthermore, conduct information campaigns to address the issues of distrust in the new ID cards among conservative groups of the population.
- Promote Computer literacy, i.e. how to use the ID card reader, pin codes, what is a digital signature and how it works, as well as distributing video instructions and ads via media channels on how to cast one's vote online
- Government should invest more in building E-infrastructure in the regions, and most importantly, increase internet penetration in the rural areas.
- Work closely with political parties to explain the benefits and security of E-voting systems. Explain how the votes cast through them are protected and how anonymity is guaranteed.

To the international community and countries with the experience of E-voting

- Assist, by bringing in foreign experts and involving Estonia, in order to share knowledge and skills.
- Cooperate closely with the CEC and other institutions responsible for the administration of elections to ensure an E-voting infrastructure is secure against possible hacking and works properly.
- Organize special training and workshops to inform the third sector about possible loopholes and how to check on actors who could abuse the system.

To international and local non-governmental organizations as well as to the local media

- Actively cooperate with the government of Georgia on information campaigns and popularization of internet voting.
- Make sure an online voting process is free from government / local authority intervention by closely monitoring the process, especially on election day when paper votes could invalidate the online ones already cast, as well as when the E-votes are opened for counting.
- Work more closely with ethnic minorities in order to make internet voting more accessible to them and boost their participation.

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