



## Political Polarization – a Vicious Circle or a Missed Opportunity for Small Political Parties?

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Depicting the October 2, 2021 local elections as a “referendum” brought a revisiting of the distribution of votes among the established political parties. The votes of those inclined towards the opposition merged, consolidating into backing for the largest opposition party – the United National Movement (UNM). However, the UNM was able to secure only 30.60% of the total votes (cesko.ge 2021a), while the ruling Georgian Dream party managed to get more than 43% of the votes (cesko.ge 2021a). In spite of concerns about alleged violations expressed by OSCE/ODIHR and local non-governmental organizations (Transparency International Georgia 2021, Interpresnews.ge 2021), these figures eradicated the possibility of snap parliamentary elections. However, they might be seen as a strong warning signal for the government, which has opted in its third term to confront Georgia’s Western partners and challenge general democratic principles.

Consideration of why, regardless of the mass mobilization of opposition voters around the UNM, the party didn’t manage to alter the status quo is interesting. This paper discusses whether a vicious circle of political polarization was the only factor that hindered the small parties from challenging the position of the ruling parties in these elections.

### Why the Appropriation of the Small Parties’ Voters by the UNM Might be a Problem?

Local elections, held on 2 October, 2021 confirmed the earlier findings (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2018), that political polarization and the “monopolization” of political space by the UNM and Georgian Dream are the major factors that are reducing the influence of small political parties in Georgian politics. However, it’s noteworthy that in the elections of October 2, polarization affected mostly those political players with no past connections with the Georgian Dream party; those not affiliated with the Georgian Dream party failed to

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achieve any significant electoral success. In the electoral returns, compared to the 2017 elections, the votes of the largest opposition party, the UNM, increased from 17.08% (cesko.ge 2017a) to 30.68% (cesko.ge 2021a). In the opposition political spectrum such allocation of voters' preferences seems logical due to the context of the elections. By giving the local elections "referendum" status, the opposition parties highlighted the existing divisions between opposition voters and those of the ruling party. This was further aggravated by the unexpected return of the informal leader of the UNM and ex-president of Georgia, and as a result the support of opposition voters for the UNM accumulated.

With its number of votes, the UNM is the leading opposition party. Given that sometimes the first rounds of elections don't result in a clear win for the Georgian Dream and there is a need of a run-off (Transparency International Georgia 2018, Radio Liberty 2012), this shows the UNM has a definite capacity to challenge the Georgian Dream in elections. However, for now the UNM does not have the electoral resources to replace the ruling party. The percentage of the electorate who are UNM voters proves this: until 2 October 2021, in parliamentary elections the party received around 27% of the votes (cesko.ge 2016a, cesko.ge 2020a) which is not sufficient to win. On October 2, even under the conditions of the highest degree of polarization, 30% (cesko.ge 2021a) was the maximum number of votes received by the UNM and accordingly it was unable to position itself as a political party that would be able to hinder the Georgian Dream from receiving more than 43% of the votes and lead to snap elections. One may propose the alleged violation concerns expressed by international and local observation organizations as a counter-argument for this view, but in the election history of Georgia the misuse of administrative resources and other election irregularities have previously been detected, as well. However, for the elections of October 2, the largest opposition party didn't consolidate enough support to alter the results of the elections, as happened in 2012.

When discussing the reasons why the UNM is unable to consolidate voter support, it is naïve to state that the mass public is satisfied with the Georgian Dream's achievements in the areas of domestic or foreign politics and that this decreases support for the largest opposition party. In this context, the assumption that the UNM's electoral results reflect a combination of retrospective-voting (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007) and protest-voting models (Pop-Eleches 2010) might be more relevant. Specifically, the 27% of the voters who constantly support the UNM may be those who are fascinated by the institutional reforms and subsequent benefits and voted for the UNM for historical reasons, reflecting its past performance. However, the mobilization of more than 27% of votes for the UNM is complicated by two factors. On the one hand, the UNM's authoritative governance style aligned with the idea of a strong state is deeply embedded in the collective memory, and the informal leadership of Saakashvili over the party aggravates existing views in society. On the second, this factor pushes a particular segment of voters to protest-voting in favor of the major counterpart of the UNM – the Georgian Dream. Apart from the existing leadership and the mistakes made during their tenure, an altered configuration of the electorate might also be a challenge for the UNM. For younger generations, basic living conditions and such factors as admission to university without the need for corrupt bargaining are already a

given factor in the environment, and they expect political parties to promote values higher than mere self-survival if they are to win support.

When considering the fact that the UNM is unable to forge sufficient electoral support to defeat the incumbent party in elections due to the aforementioned factors, mobilization of minor party voters around UNM is a problem. In the light of the recent political developments of Georgia, where the government openly refuses to fulfill international obligations and brings progress on the building of Georgia's democracy to a deadlock, it's more likely that the absence of major political alternatives could grant the Georgian Dream more freedom to harm the internal democratic processes and relations with strategic partners.

### **A Contest for the United National Movement's Domain?**

In the Georgian realm, political polarization is certainly an important circumstance that significantly reduces small political parties' political influence in the political arena. However, political polarization is not the only factor that leads to the accumulation of votes of the pro-western, small party voters around the UNM and leaving them without significant influence.

In the Georgian political space, where ideological dividing lines among political parties are obscure (Barkaia et al, 2016), it can be said that voters differentiate political parties according to their party positions. Due to political culture or other factors, parties are assessed through party representatives' public statements rather than their respective party programs. In general, public statements by UNM members are mainly focused on rapid economic development, elimination of poverty and enhancing the Euro-Atlantic aspirations for the country (formulanews.ge 2021, interpresnews.ge 2021). Even though the political programs of small, pro-western parties incorporate a variety of issues (partiebi.ge. 2020), in recent years many of them have opted to focus on topics identical to UNM when talking to the media. (lelo2020.ge 2020, Giorgi Vashadze 2020, European Georgia 2020). By considering national issues (NDI 2021) with which Georgians are having to deal, the small parties' choice might be rational, but there is one condition to take into account - voter turnout in elections does not increase (cesko.ge 2016b, cesko.ge 2017b, cesko.ge 2020b, cesko.ge 2021b), therefore the segment of the voters with opposition preferences is the target audience of both the UNM and the small parties. The achievement of electoral success in the same domain in which the UNM enjoys stable figures for a high level of voter support can be exceptionally hard for the small parties in the conditions of radical polarization. When the choice for the voters narrows down to candidates of the opposition and the ruling party, the UNM has a comparative advantage over small parties. UNM has already proved that it is capable of bringing positive results in terms of advancing the country and improving the well-being of the population. It is different for the small parties which have not held office before and thus might be perceived by the public as less credible. At the same time, when political polarization is intensified, votes are cast according to strategic voting logic (Myatt 2007) and

voters support the political party that is not only closer to their preferences, but has better chances of winning.

## **Did the Voters Notice the Difference Between the Small Parties and the UNM in the Elections of 2021?**

Prior to the 2 October, 2021 election, communication messages from the small parties did not differ from the discourses of the UNM. Small parties, as did the UNM, underscored the importance of the upcoming election labeling it as a “referendum” and underlined the urgency of changing the incumbent party (Georgian Public Broadcaster 2021). They did not carry out any thematic and policy-oriented discussion on what programs or policy premises they had for these local self-government elections. Furthermore, the majority of the small parties had not published their political programs even one month prior to the election (Chichua 2021a). That might be regarded as a significant mistake from the small parties’ side. Under the conditions of political polarization, the UNM needed to focus only on the meaning of the “referendum” since its supporters had already seen how the party operates when in power. Minor parties did not give any possibilities for voters to understand their plans, values and views. Thus the small parties missed the opportunity to give voters the chance of discovering substantive differences between them and the UNM.

## **Alliance with the United National Movement, as Efficient Way to Mobilize Voters with Opposition Views?**

Alliance with the UNM about agreements on candidate-running in elections in Tbilisi (Chichua 2021b) could have been one of the factors that led to the insignificant electoral results of the small parties. The strategy of “Putting aside the parties’ narrow self-interests” didn’t bring any significant success to UNM, namely its traditional electoral support increased just slightly, by only 4%, nationwide. Presumably, the small parties’ decision to ally with the UNM put an equation sign between the UNM and the small parties in the eyes of the citizens. And the voters, who principally opposed UNM candidates, didn’t share the spirit of the common oppositional goal and did not cast their votes for the small parties they had supported in the past. While the votes of small parties were scattered in the election because of the agreement on having a single opposition candidate on the one hand and because some small parties’ participated independently (Arabuli 2021) on the other, a common coalition of a small parties could have contributed to an increase in the overall number of opposition voters.

## What Opportunities Did the Small Parties Have in the Context of Polarization?

In the Georgian realm, political polarization is perceived as a vicious circle that hinders minor party development and thus a diversion in a political landscape that could eventually build democratic consolidation. Though, beyond polarization, there are opportunities for small parties that they have not yet used.

In the “referendum” of October 2, 2021, the fact that, despite extreme polarization, the majority of voters neither wanted UNM to return to power, nor did the Georgian Dream match their values, produced an improvement in the environment for small political parties. Namely, Georgian election turnout history illustrates that (cesko.ge 2016b, cesko.ge 2017b, cesko.ge 2020b, cesko.ge 2021b) usually only about half of the electorate casts its votes for the dominant parties, while the other half doesn't vote at all. Regardless of the given circumstances, the small parties could not identify that there was a significant segment of the voters whose values and needs differed from the polarized political agenda. The small parties could become representatives of those potential voters if they adopted niche party positions that could match the needs of frustrated citizens and intensify public discussions about the issues important for them. These may be written in their party programs but they are rarely discussed beyond professional circles. However, when considering the political polarization again, it should be said that for the 2 October elections the small parties could align with this segment of the voters only through a long-term and a consistent strategy. At the same time, positioning with specific niches would simplify the choice for voters who lean towards opposition but do not support UNM and either didn't vote due to a moral dilemma or because of the lack of substantial differences in party positions between the small parties and the UNM. Instead, they voted again in favor of the UNM.

### Conclusion

Based on this discussion, it can be assumed that in the local elections of October 2 2021, political polarization was not the main factor that led to consolidation of opposition votes around the UNM, but the political decision of the small parties per se to remain in a domain that was most affected by the existing political polarization. They didn't have a long-term strategy to attract voters who have different preferences from the polarized political agenda. In the short-term their decision might be perceived as counter-productive and destructive for the aim of achieving a common oppositional goal, as they neither managed to increase support to the UNM, nor did they contribute independently to the electoral processes. Staying in the political arena “monopolized” by the UNM can be regarded as damaging in the long run, as well. The minor parties, without clear party positions and party strategies differing those of the UNM, are unlikely to secure places as significant actors and provide political alternatives to the “monopolist” National Movement which, in the case of power transfer in favor of the UNM, would decrease the traditional threat of one-party rule in the country. Lack of building-blocks for a sustainable multi-party system on their part, in the

light of democracy backsliding and the complicated relationship with Western partners, does not provide a hopeful signal for the country's stability and its further development.

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