



BRIEFING PAPER

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Parliamentary election in Georgia

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Summary

Georgia has been a frontline country in the tussle for influence in the former Soviet space between Russia and the West. Western nations and organisations are attempting to support Georgia's move towards Western-style liberal democracy, with NATO and EU membership as possible end points. Russia wants to prevent Georgia moving out of its claimed privileged sphere of influence, and particularly wants to prevent Georgia from joining NATO which, just on the Russian border, it would see as a threat.

The road towards democracy has not been completely smooth, as in other former Soviet states, so this year's parliamentary election has been watched closely.

2020 parliamentary election

In November 2020 Georgia held the second round of its parliamentary election, under a new system based largely on proportional representation.

The electoral system itself had been in focus before and during the campaign, leading to large demonstrations in the capital, Tbilisi. The opposition felt that the old system, where half the seats in Parliament were allocated proportionally and half from single-Member constituencies, favoured the governing Georgian Dream party.

In March 2020 the Government reached [agreement with the opposition](#) on a new system featuring more proportional seats. International partners had encouraged compromise, hoping that the agreement would pave the way for an election less marked by polarisation.

Those hopes appear to have been dashed. The opposition claimed that the governing Georgian Dream party's [advantage in the first round](#) was fraudulent, boycotted the second round of the election and is now boycotting Parliament altogether.

International observers from the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and others [assessed the election as broadly competitive](#), despite many shortcomings. Opposition leaders, generally considered more pro-Western than the present Government, denounced the international observers' initial conclusions.

Government

Since 2018 Salome Zurbashvili has been President. She is [nominally independent](#) but has the support of the governing Georgian Dream party. The presidency's powers have been reduced in favour of the Prime Minister in recent years. But the real power in Georgia is widely thought to belong to Bidzina Ivanishvili, a billionaire who was Prime Minister from 2012 to 2013. He returned to a more frontline position in 2018 when he became Chairman of the Georgian Dream party he had founded in 2012.

The Prime Minister is Giorgi Gakharia, a relatively young former businessman and the third person to hold the post in the last two years.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia

Two Georgian regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have broken away from Georgia and are now under Russian influence. A war in 2008 saw pro-Russian forces increase their grip on the enclaves and their armed forces are now incorporated into Russia's. Russia and a few other countries not including the UK have recognised the regions' independence

The ceasefire that ended the 2008 hostilities saw the creation of the [EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia](#), although this only monitors the ceasefire from the Georgian side of the line of separation. Pro-Russian forces are accused both of shifting the line of

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separation further into the heart of Georgia and of “borderisation”: making the line look increasingly like an international frontier.

The situation is relatively stable at present.

NATO

Georgia’s possible NATO membership was one of the issues at stake in the tussle over the breakaway regions, with Russia seen by many in the West as holding the territories as a bargaining chip to prevent that happening. Georgia retains [close relations with NATO](#) but at present its move towards membership has stalled, although ultimate membership remains popular among Georgians and remains Government policy. The same applies to EU membership, a [goal supported by most Georgians](#).

UK relations

The UK supports Georgia’s territorial integrity and a [strengthening relationship with NATO](#). UK monitors participated in the EU Monitoring Mission until January 2020.

A [treaty to replace the EU framework](#) under which the two countries used to trade was presented to the UK Parliament in 2019. It includes provisions on political and security co-operation.

The UK has a [development aid programme in Georgia](#), focused on education, strengthening Georgia’s political institutions and helping fight corruption, with a budget of £8.5 million in 2020/2021.

1. On the front line

Georgia has been a frontline country in the competition for influence in the former Soviet space between Russia and the West. The UK, the US and the EU are attempting to [support Georgia's](#) move towards Western-style liberal democracy. NATO and EU membership are technically possible and remain the strategic goals of successive Georgian Governments.

Russia, on the other hand, wants to prevent Georgia moving out of its claimed [privileged sphere of influence](#), and particularly wants to prevent Georgia from joining NATO.¹

Just as in other former Soviet states, the road towards democracy has not been completely smooth, so this year's parliamentary election has been watched closely. Would the slightly more pro-Russian party retain its dominance? Perhaps more importantly, would the election signal that Georgia is succumbing to oligarch-dominated "managed democracy" or would fair competition of ideas prevail?

¹ For more information on Russia's motivations, see the Commons Briefing Papers: [Russia foreign and security policy](#), 2016, and [Cool conflicts in Russia's near neighbourhood](#), 2019

2. 2020 parliamentary election

On 31 October 2020 the first round of the parliamentary election was held, under a new electoral law that provides for 120 Members chosen by proportional representation and another 30 from single-member constituencies. The second round, which only applies to single-member constituencies, where no candidate reached 51 per cent in the first round, took place on 21 November.

Political issues

Georgian voters are largely concerned about the economy and are generally pro-Western when it comes to foreign relations, according to a [poll published in October 2020](#); Georgians are not particularly ideological and tend to think that elections are more about personalities than policies.

The United National Movement (UNM) party [nominated Mikheil Saakashvili](#), the former President, as its candidate for Prime Minister. Mr Saakashvili is not in Georgia, however, and the Justice minister said that if he returned he would be jailed, having been convicted *in absentia* of abuse of power and obstruction of justice. Saakashvili had been the UNM Chairman until March 2019, despite living in Ukraine.

Giorgi Gakharia, incumbent Prime Minister since 2019, is Georgian Dream (GD) candidate for Prime Minister. The ruling party's popularity was [declining before the onset of the pandemic](#), but the Government's relatively successful efforts to contain the virus seem to have boosted GD. (Just before the election, however, Georgia's infection rate started to rise strongly.)

Electoral reform

The electoral system itself has been a high-profile political issue recently: how many seats in Parliament to fill on a proportional basis and which parties that would favour.

In Summer 2019 there were public demonstrations in favour of reform. An electoral reform bill proposing a fully proportional system, presented by Georgian Dream, was rejected in Parliament later in 2019. Some Georgian Dream Members had rebelled against the leadership and later defected to other parties; the new system could have risked some of their seats.

In November 2019 some 20,000 protesters gathered outside the Parliament building to protest against the failure to pass the reform and to demand snap elections. They claimed that the existing, mixed system whereby 77 MPs were elected proportionally and 73 through majoritarian electoral constituencies favoured Georgian Dream.

On 8 March 2020, the parties reached an [agreement](#) on the new, mixed-voting system: 120 Members would be elected from proportional party lists and 30 Members elected in single-Member constituencies. The threshold for party representation in proportional seats was fixed at one per cent of the vote, to give smaller parties representation.

Demonstrations outside Parliament June 2019

In June 2019, largely UNM and European Georgia supporters started a protest outside the Parliament building against a visit in support of the Orthodox Church by a Russian Duma Member. The Russian had earlier that week voted in the Duma (Russian Parliament) to recognise the independence of Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia (see below).

As a group of international parliamentarians met at the Georgian Parliament, the Member of the Duma had taken the Speaker's seat. The breach of protocol was taken by the opposition as a national humiliation. They see the Government as overly friendly to Russian interests.

Demonstrators demanded the resignation of the Government and tried to storm the building. When the police used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the crowd, [240 demonstrators were injured](#), and 305 protesters were arrested. The Speaker of Parliament resigned.

First round results

Georgian Dream claims another victory

Most results come out in the first round; it is only the single-member constituency seats that hold a runoff in the event of no candidate exceeding 50 per cent of the vote.

In the popular vote, Georgian Dream received [48.15 per cent](#), while the United National Movement (UNM) bloc had 27.14 per cent and European Georgia, led by former members of the United National Movement, was third with 3.78 per cent.

That gave Georgian Dream 61 out of the 120 proportional seats and a dominant share of the single-member constituency seats: 13 out of 30. The remaining 17 single-member seats remained to be decided in the second round run-off.

Protests and boycott

Opposition parties including the United National Movement (former President Mikheil Saakashvili's party) and the European Georgia party rejected the official results and said that it would boycott the second round; [UNM followed suit on 19 November](#).

A series of protests in Tbilisi and elsewhere ensued. Water cannon were used to disperse [some 45,000 people](#) on 8 November. The demonstrations continue at the time of writing, and opposition Members are refusing to enter the Parliament.

Second round results

[Early results](#) from the election commission indicated that Georgian Dream was easily leading in all the seats where there was a second round, suggesting that opposition voters were indeed staying away from polling stations. Turnout was [estimated at 27 per cent](#).

In total GD would secure 91 seats in the Parliament - 24 fewer than in the outgoing Parliament.

Election observers

Following an invitation from the Georgian authorities, the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) co-ordinated an international observer mission with observers from the Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE, Council of Europe and NATO. In their preliminary findings the OSCE found that the 31 October round was competitive:

The 31 October parliamentary elections were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected. Nevertheless, pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state reduced public confidence in some aspects of the process.²

The US-based NDI also observed the election, coming to a perhaps less favourable conclusion than the OSCE:

...alleged irregularities in results protocols, widespread reports of potentially intimidating behavior in or around polling stations, delays in the publication of results and persistent perceptions of pre-election abuses of power detracted from notable improvements in the legal framework and administrative procedures for Georgia's October 31, 2020 parliamentary elections.³

The findings of the international observer missions irked the opposition. Ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili called the leader of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) observation team, [Tiny Kox, a "Russian spy"](#) who "receives money from Russia".

The Council of Europe rapporteurs rejected the criticisms and [on 23 November called for parties to take up the seats in Parliament](#) that they had won:

These elections have resulted in a diverse parliament where the ruling majority will face a strong opposition, that can ensure proper parliamentary oversight. The only appropriate forum for this, as well as for debating and challenging diverging political views, is the parliament.

3. Government

Presidential election 2018

On 28 November 2018 the former French diplomat and Georgian Foreign Minister Salome Zurbishvili was elected the first female head of state in the region since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Salome Zurbishvili had only just come ahead of her main rival the first round, but managed to [defeat him with a 20-point margin](#) in the second round.

The sharp improvement in the second round [raised questions](#) and the opposition candidate did not accept the result; the NATO/OSCE

² International Election Observation Mission, Georgia – Parliamentary Elections, 31 October 2020, [Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions](#)

³ [NDI Report: Allegations of Irregularities, Intimidation and Abuses Detract from Legal and Administrative Improvements for Georgia's Parliamentary Elections](#), NDI press release, 2 November 2020

observer mission concluded that she had had an undue advantage.⁴ For example, Georgian Dream announced that a charitable foundation controlled by their founder, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, would write off 600,000 people's debts. This was widely viewed in Georgia as vote-buying. The observers also found that there were incidents of violence, poor coverage in the private media and inadequate control of campaign expenditure.⁵

Georgian Dream party

The election confirmed the ascendancy of the Georgian Dream party, in power since 2012, when it toppled the then President Mikheil Saakashvili. The GD is generally less pro-Western than the opposition United National Movement. Many observers say that the real power lies with Georgian Dream's billionaire founder and backer, Bidzina Ivanishvili.⁶

Prime Minister

The post of President is now largely ceremonial since [a series of constitutional changes](#) boosting the formal powers of the Prime Minister. Mamuka Bakhtadze of the Georgian Dream party was Prime Minister for less than a year in 2018-2019, however; the quick turnover of postholders suggests Prime Ministers are stronger in theory than in practice.

Giorgi Gakharia

On 8 September 2019 Bakhtadze was replaced by [Giorgi Gakharia](#), the third Prime Minister in two years. After a career in business, Gakharia entered politics in 2013, becoming the Business Ombudsman. Three years later, he had become Minister of the Economy. Then, after a year at the Economy ministry he was promoted to Minister of the Interior in 2017. He became Prime Minister in 2019.

4. Conflict background

4.1 Conflict

The northern regions of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, along the Russian border, have long been ethnically distinct from the rest of the country. After Georgia's independence from the collapsed Soviet Union in 1991, war broke out in both regions, settling into an uneasy truce that left separatists in control of large areas.

In 2008 simmering tension between Georgian official forces and breakaway forces in South Ossetia boiled over when Georgian forces responded to Ossetian provocation and Russian troops joined the battle.

⁴ [Opposition rejects Georgia presidential poll result, urges protests](#), *Reuters*, 29 November 2018

⁵ International Election Observation Mission, Georgia – Presidential Election, 28 [Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions](#), NATO/OSCE/CoE, European Parliament, October 2018

⁶ Amy MacKinnon, [A flickering beacon of democracy in Russia's backyard](#), *Foreign Policy*, 27 November 2019

A ceasefire was agreed with French assistance in August 2008, leaving Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Russian-backed separatists' control.⁷

Since the 2008 war, Russia has consolidated its military presence, building military bases inside both regions.

There are detentions along the line of control; one Georgian citizen [died in the breakaway authorities' custody](#) in 2020. Russian-backed forces, nevertheless, have moved the line of separation deeper into Georgia, depriving Georgian citizens of homes and land, and leaving pro-Russian forces occupying some 20 per cent of Georgian territory. These forces have also gradually hardened the line of separation into a border ('[borderisation](#)'), which splits communities.

Moscow has now recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states and both regions have signed treaties with Russia incorporating their troops into the Russian army. South Ossetia is also recognised by Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and Syria.

4.2 International engagement

EU conflict monitoring

The [European Union Monitoring Mission \(EUMM\) in Georgia](#) created after the 2008 peace deal, provided for the EU to monitor the lines of control between Georgia-controlled and Russia-controlled parts of Georgia.

Russia does not, however, allow the EUMM in the disputed territory, disagreeing with the EU's interpretation of the agreement. Monitors therefore operate from Georgian-controlled territory.

The EUMM tries to defuse potential flashpoints by encouraging communication between the two sides, attempting to minimise the impact on local people and facilitate dialogue.

In December 2018 its mandate was [extended to 2020](#).

In its September 2020 update, the EUMM called on participants to make concerted efforts to maintain "relatively stable" general conditions.⁸

The last [UK participants in the EUMM left the mission on 31 January 2020](#), because of the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

Council of Europe

[Georgia joined the Council of Europe](#) (CoE) in 1999 and has ratified many of the CoE's conventions.

In November 2018 the CoE's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) issued a statement from monitors in Georgia condemning the "borderisation" of the line dividing South Ossetia from Georgia-controlled areas:

⁷ For more see the Commons Briefing Paper [Georgia: the conflict with Russia and the crisis in South Ossetia](#), August 2008

⁸ [The 97th Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism meeting takes place in Ergneti](#), European Monitoring Mission in Georgia, 24 September 2020

These illegal actions by the Russian Federation undermine stability in the region and split families and people.⁹



Map based on [Caucasus regions map.svg](#) by [Peter Fitzgerald](#), Creative Commons

NATO

Georgia became a Partner for Peace with NATO in 1994, not long after independence. After the “Rose Revolution” deposed Eduard Shevardnadze in 2003, Georgia moved quickly to build the relationship and at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, existing NATO members announced that Georgia would in due course become a full member. Despite US enthusiasm, Georgia was not awarded a Membership Action Plan at the Bucharest summit, which would have set out clear steps to membership. France and Germany reportedly argued against it.

Russia had warned that if Georgia’s eventual NATO membership was agreed at Bucharest, “the next day the process of real secession of these two territories from Georgia will begin”.¹⁰

Georgia has not progressed from that point, although NATO [describes Georgia](#) as “one of the Alliance’s closest partners”.

Following the August 2008 conflict, NATO’s Parliamentary Assembly bolstered its institutional relationship with the Georgian Parliament by creating the [Georgia-NATO Interparliamentary Council](#) (GNIC).

On 28 October 2020 the UK Government [set out its policy](#) on Georgia and NATO:

The Government supports NATO’s Enlargement process. The UK plays an active role in the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP), a set of initiatives aimed at strengthening Georgia’s

⁹ [Monitoring rapporteurs condemn ongoing ‘borderisation’ in Georgia](#), PACE press release, 26 November 2018

¹⁰ [‘Russia warns against Georgia NATO membership’](#), *Reuters*, 11 March 2008

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defence capabilities and developing closer security cooperation and interoperability with NATO Allies.

International Criminal Court

In January 2016, the International Criminal Court was authorised to open an investigation into possible crimes against humanity and war crimes committed during the Russia-Georgia war in 2008.¹¹ The case remains with the ICC.

USA

The US considers Georgia a strategic partner and allocated [\\$127 million in assistance](#) to Georgia in 2017. US policy is to support Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration:

The United States is committed to helping Georgia deepen Euro-Atlantic ties and strengthen its democratic institutions. The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and condemns Russia's 2008 invasion of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which remain occupied by Russia today.¹²

Russian recognition

In August 2008 Russia officially recognised both South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, six months after the West had widely recognised the independence of Kosovo from Serbia. The vast majority of UN member states do not recognise those regions' independence.

“Normalisation”

Georgia Dream's policy on the conflict over the past few years has been one of normalisation with Russia, allowing increasing trade and tourist links despite the problem with the enclaves. [Commentators say](#) that has contributed to the “relative calm” that the EU monitors recently described.

4.3 Outlook

Dramatic changes in foreign policy are unlikely, especially if Ivanishvili cements his hold on power further.

The International Crisis Group argued recently that the post-election Georgian Government should build on the policy of normalisation to encompass discussion between Georgia and Russia about the enclaves, in order to reduce friction at the line of separation.¹³

¹¹ International Criminal Court, [Situation in Georgia, ICC-01/15](#)

¹² [U.S. Relations With Georgia](#), US Department of State, October 2020

¹³ [Georgia and Russia: Why and How to Save Normalisation](#), International Crisis Group, 28 October 2020

5. UK relations

In January 2018 FCO Minister Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon answered a question on the UK's position on the Georgia conflict, saying that the UK supports Georgian territorial integrity and works with the UN, the OSCE and the EU in efforts to build Georgian resilience.¹⁴

5.1 Brexit

EUMM

There were [six UK secondees to the EUMM](#) until January 2020, when their contracts ran out.

[Asked in September 2019](#) whether the UK will continue to co-operate with the EUMM after Brexit, the Government said that would depend on a future relationship agreement that allowed the EU and the UK to co-operate on such shared threats.

By May 2020, however, the UK Government had dropped security, defence and foreign policy co-operation proposals from its [draft documents on the future UK/EU relationship](#).

Trade

In November 2019, the Government presented the [UK/Georgia: Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement](#) to Parliament. The House of Lords [reported on the treaty](#) in January 2020. The Government aims, as far as possible, to maintain the provisions of the [EU Association Agreement with Georgia](#) as the UK leaves the EU. According to the [explanatory memorandum](#), the treaty “provides a framework for political, foreign and security cooperation and includes a comprehensive preferential trade agreement”.

The UK has [expanded the commercial section](#) at the British Embassy in Tbilisi and is looking for opportunities to increase bilateral trade.

5.2 UK development aid

The UK has a 2020/21 budget of [£8.5 million for development projects](#) in Georgia. These are focused on improving environmental action and strengthening governance.

Significant UK aid comes through the Government's Good Governance Fund. Wendy Morton [told Parliament in September 2020](#) that the aid is aimed at strengthening institutions and combatting corruption.

¹⁴ [HL Deb 10 January 2018, cc186-9](#)

6. Further reading

[*Georgia and Russia: Why and How to Save Normalisation*](#), International Crisis Group, 28 October 2020

Philip Remler, [*Russia's Stony Path in the South Caucasus*](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 October 2020

[*Cool conflicts in Russia's near neighbourhood*](#), January 2020

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