

# BULLETIN

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## Parliamentary Elections in Georgia in the Shadow of a Prison Scandal

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*The disclosure of shocking films from inside Gldani prison two weeks before the parliamentary elections in Georgia triggered a wave of anti-government protests and increased the chances for the opposition to do well in the elections. If the ruling party wins and the opposition decides not to recognise the results, long-lasting mass protests may be expected. This situation will be a real test for Georgian democracy, for which support from Poland and other EU countries will play a crucial role.*

**Parliamentary Campaign.** Ahead of the parliamentary elections in Georgia scheduled for 1 October, there have been increasingly confrontational attitudes displayed by both camps of supporters and opponents of President Mikheil Saakashvili. As a result of an initiative by Georgian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, six opposition parties formed the Georgian Dream coalition in the spring of this year. The political programme of this formation is inconsistent, as it covers both left-wing and right-wing concepts. In addition, the coalition includes parties with a strong pro-Western profile and groups determined to work closely with Russia. Despite the growing popularity of the opposition, especially in large urban centres, the ruling United National Movement (UNM) party has maintained a significant advantage. According to the pre-election polls conducted at the beginning of September, 37% of respondents wanted to vote for this party, while only 12% voiced support for the opposition. The results also showed the presence of a large group of undecided voters (43%).

Georgian authorities have since the beginning of the campaign limited the access of the opposition to the main TV channels. President Saakashvili's team presented the opposition's potential rise to power as a return to the situation under President Eduard Shevardnadze, i.e., a time of corrupt police and bureaucracy and the heyday of both petty crime and mafia structures. In addition, the authorities have deprived Georgian Dream of a large part of financial resources for its campaign. The funds were confiscated in August on account of penalties imposed by the authorities for alleged illegal payments of grants to the account of the coalition. The government's actions led the opposition's representatives to declare they would not acknowledge the election results unless the crackdown was reversed. In mid-September, however, the opposition leaders changed their minds and announced that they would accept the result of the election if it were recognised by international organisations such as the OSCE and the EU, which have sent observer missions to Georgia.

It is worth noting that the popularity of the ruling party has been because of the largely positive results of reforms carried out in the nine years of its rule. In that time, UNM has created regulations to facilitate the conduct of business in Georgia, significantly reduced corruption and organised crime, and built from scratch an efficient police force. However, a large part of the population, especially in the capital, sees the current situation as the appropriation of the state by the UNM government. This part of Georgian society resists the authoritarian-like methods the government uses to fight with the opposition and independent media.

**Issue of Violence Against Prisoners.** The chances of the ruling party to win a landslide victory in the upcoming parliamentary elections significantly decreased with the disclosure on 18 September of recordings made inside Gldani prison in Tbilisi showing brutal violence by guards against inmates. The recordings were given to Georgian journalists in Brussels by a prison guard. Shortly after the disclosure of the videos, one of the main streets of the capital was blocked by demonstrators

demanding the resignation of Interior Minister Bacho Akhalaia, charging him with allowing the torture of prisoners. Akhalaia, who is one of the most important figures in the UNM, was the head of the prison ministry in 2006–2008.

According to the authorities, making the recordings public shortly before the election was a deliberate act by the opposition and also perhaps a Russian provocation aimed at striking the government in Georgia. The authorities have not disputed the accuracy of the recordings and, therefore, Prisons Minister Khatuna Kalmakhelidze, who said she felt personally responsible for the failure of the reform of the penitentiary centres, resigned immediately from her post. President Saakashvili appointed the current ombudsman, Giorgi Tugushi, to fill the Minister's role. As ombudsman since 2009, Tugushi has indicated in reports violations of prisoners' rights and had unsuccessfully appealed to the authorities to take action. Both politicians declared a willingness to completely reconstruct the country's prison system. The protests also led to the stepping down of a head of the Interior Ministry, Bacho Akhalaia. Since then, the scale of the demonstrations has decreased, but the protesters continue to demand the unpopular politician face justice.

**Estimated Post-election Situation.** The disclosure of the prison recordings probably does not undermine public confidence in the ruling party to the extent that UNM would have lost the election to the opposition, though there is no doubt this event will bring voters to the Georgian Dream coalition. In case the latter is defeated, it will be able to take advantage of anti-government sentiment in society and lead massive, long-term street demonstrations in Tbilisi questioning the authenticity and integrity of the election. Opposition media already announced the beginning of the "Broomstick Revolution" (because of the brooms carried by protesters after the disclosure of the prison scandal) on the scale of the "Rose Revolution" in 2003, which led to former President Shevardnadze's renunciation of office. The key issue, therefore, seems to be the decision by Georgian Dream's leaders that will be taken shortly after the election whether to participate in the newly elected parliament or remain outside of it and deny the whole political system. The latter choice would result in a decline of public confidence in Georgia's democratic institutions. The unanswered question remains whether the authorities will be able to control the protests without resorting to the use of force in case the demonstrators are radicalised.

**Recommendations.** Poland and other EU countries should continue to support reforms in Georgia. It is important to treat democratisation as a condition *sine qua non* for further support for the current government in Tbilisi. If clear violations of the principles of democracy and human rights emerge during the elections, the EU should respond decisively. It should be emphasised that the regress of democratisation will affect the process of bringing Georgia closer to the EU and prospects for signing an Association Agreement. In the event of an escalation of post-election conflict between the government and opposition, representatives of the EU, who now enjoy the trust of both sides, can play the role of mediator for the parties. It is important to maintain a dialogue and prevent the extreme radicalisation of Georgian politicians on both sides of the political spectrum.

Poland and other EU countries should support Georgia in developing election standards similar to those prevailing in the Member States. In this respect, the intensification of contacts between the Polish State Electoral Commission and the Georgian Central Electoral Commission may provide Georgia with experience from the Polish transition. If next year's presidential election in Georgia is well prepared, the broad participation of international observers from EU countries should be a high priority. To help in this effort, more dynamic work by the "Polish–Georgian actions" parliamentary group can also be helpful.

Poland should also continue modernisation assistance to Georgia. Violations of human rights in prisons is only one problem that requires decisive reforms to be enacted. Poland can offer Georgia examples of solutions it could implement in the prisons. Polish development assistance should be continued to support Georgia's territorial self-government, entrepreneurship in rural areas and other projects conducive to improving the situation of rural residents, who constitute nearly half of the country's population.