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# 2024 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: ASSESSMENT OF THE PRE-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT

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June 25, 2024



**The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) is monitoring the pre-election period with the support of the European Union, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The content of this assessment document is the sole responsibility of ISFED and does not necessarily reflect the views of the donor organizations.**

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# 1. Introduction

On October 26, 2024, parliamentary elections will be held in Georgia. The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) will conduct comprehensive monitoring of the elections, covering the pre-election period, election day, and the post-election period.

ISFED launched its monitoring mission across the country in 73 districts of Georgia on June 1, 2024. The central and regional offices of the organization continuously monitor political and electoral processes nationwide. The report below reviews and assesses the political environment in the country, the legal framework conditioned by the recent legislative changes, including the introduction of electronic technologies, the media environment, political parties' activities, and the enabling environment for election observer organizations.

The 2024 Parliamentary Elections are pivotal for Georgia's democratic development and European integration. These upcoming elections represent significant milestones in Georgia's history:

- They will be conducted under the status of an EU membership candidate country. Free, fair, and competitive elections are crucial in meeting one of the nine recommendations from the European Commission for Georgia to advance on the path to European integration.
- The elections will be held using a fully proportional system, ensuring that Georgian society's political preferences are accurately reflected in the legislature and promoting political pluralism.
- The elections will be held using electronic technologies. Modern voting technologies can enhance the voting process if appropriately adopted with political will. However, readiness for such a significant change is also essential.

Despite popular opposition, adopting the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence has markedly worsened the pre-election period in Georgia. This legislation contradicts Georgia's European and democratic aspirations and poses an existential threat to media and civil society organizations. Against this backdrop, the pre-election phase is fraught with substantial challenges for observer organizations. Neutral and impartial monitoring of the elections is particularly crucial in this context.

ISFED will undertake a comprehensive monitoring effort spanning five months to oversee the entire election process and communicate its findings to the public. Should any violations be identified, ISFED will submit complaints to electoral dispute bodies to address these issues effectively. In its commitment to enhancing the electoral environment, ISFED will develop and propose recommendations for improvements to be made. ISFED plans to deploy up to 1400 observers across Georgia on election day to ensure thorough coverage. ISFED's monitoring methodology adheres strictly to the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations<sup>1</sup>, as well as the Code of Conduct to which ISFED is a signatory.

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<sup>1</sup> Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors. *Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations*. Accessed June 23, 2024. <https://gndem.org/declaration-of-global-principles#code-of-conduct-for-non-partisan-citizen-election-observers-and-monitors>

## 2. Key Findings

The assessment of the pre-election period leads to the following key findings:

- After applying for EU membership on March 3, 2022, the European Council acknowledged Georgia's European Perspective. In December 2023, Georgia was granted the EU membership candidate country status. To progress towards full EU membership, Georgia must fulfill nine recommendations, with electoral reform being crucial.
- Alongside progress towards the EU integration path, there is a growing prevalence of anti-Western and Euroskeptic messaging in Georgia's information environment. For the first time in recent history, the ruling party has questioned Georgia's foreign policy orientation, bolstered by constitutional provisions, and sought to challenge the societal consensus on European integration.
- Despite ongoing protests, massive rallies, and critical statements from the President of Georgia, the EU, EU member states, the US, UN, NATO Secretary General, the Council of Europe, OSCE, and other international actors, the Georgian Parliament passed the re-initiated Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in May 2024 after three readings and later overrode the President's veto. Importantly, this law will harm local election observation organizations, potentially leading to some of them ceasing to exist ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections.
- For the first time in Georgia's history, the US government has sanctioned representatives from Georgia's legislative and executive branches in response to the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. This action is expected to influence the dynamics of the upcoming pre-election period in Georgia.
- The ruling party's initiation of constitutional changes and the draft law on Family Values and the Protection of Minors, aimed at the LGBTQI community, represents another significant step towards undermining Georgia's European integration efforts and violating human rights. The proposed legislative package includes amendments to 18 existing laws.
- Georgia will conduct its 2024 parliamentary elections amidst numerous changes to its electoral legislation. Significant revisions have been made since the last parliamentary elections. However, recommendations from the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the OSCE (OSCE/ODIHR), and local election observation organizations have not been fully incorporated. It should be noted that one of the European Commission's nine recommendations urges Georgia to implement OSCE/ODIHR's recommendations fully.
- Elections will be conducted under a fully proportional system for the first time in Georgia's history. Each of the 150 legislative body members will be elected from a single, multi-mandate electoral

district for a four-year term using closed lists. Additionally, due to the prohibition of electoral blocs and the imposition of a 5% entry threshold, political parties are considering forming political unions.

- In May 2024, the parliamentary majority implemented changes to the election code, introducing the institution of Delegates. Under these changes, a political party can nominate a candidate as a delegate for one of the 30 defined districts outlined in the election code. If elected, the nominated member becomes the delegate of that district, provided their party receives the highest number of votes in that specific district. ISFED views this amendment as contradictory to the fundamental principle of a fully proportional system outlined in Georgia's Constitution, which envisages a single multi-mandate electoral district.
- The 2024 parliamentary elections will be conducted without mandatory gender quotas. Following Girchi's initiative, Parliament repealed the electoral code provision for the upcoming elections, requiring every fourth position on party electoral lists to be filled by a female. The 30% financial incentive for including female candidates has also been abolished. The cancellation of gender quotas contradicts constitutional changes implemented in 2017, which envisages a positive obligation for the state to take measures addressing fundamental inequalities between men and women and ensure gender equality.
- In 2023, the responsibility for monitoring political party finance was transferred from the State Audit Office to the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB). However, the institutional independence of the ACB is questionable, primarily due to the rule by which its head is appointed. According to current legislation, the Prime Minister appoints the head of the ACB for a term of six years. To ensure the ACB's independence, it is essential that its head be appointed by a qualified majority vote in parliament.
- The introduction of electronic technologies for voter registration, voting, and tabulation represents a novelty in Georgia. These technologies, piloted several times and familiar to some segments of Georgian society, will now be used extensively. Up to 90% of voters across approximately 70% of polling stations will utilize these new technologies. Election technologies have the potential to streamline the voting process and reduce human error in vote tabulation. However, given the scale of this implementation, it is crucial that voters are adequately informed about their use.
- The composition of the Central Election Commission (CEC) in Georgia has undergone multiple changes in recent years. In March 2024, the authority to select and present candidates for the positions of CEC chairperson and non-party (professional) members to Parliament was transferred from the President of Georgia to the Speaker of the Parliament. These candidates are then elected for a five-year term by a simple parliamentary majority vote. Additionally, the position of deputy chairperson of the CEC, previously appointed through an opposition quota, has been eliminated. These latest changes were implemented contrary to recommendations from the Venice Commission, OSCE/ODIHR, and local election observer organizations.

- The Parliament adopted changes regarding decision-making at the CEC in three readings. Specifically, if the CEC fails to reach a decision through voting, which previously required the support of at least two-thirds of its members, the matter will be reconsidered at the same session. Under the new rules, the decision will be approved if a simple majority endorses it on the second vote. These changes reduce the space for consensus-based decision-making at the CEC.
- The participation of Georgian citizens living abroad in elections is notably low due to several significant challenges. These include the distance to polling stations, concerns about potential deportation due to illegal residency status, and insufficient guarantees from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia regarding their voting rights.
- Although the official election campaign begins 60 days before the elections, the ruling party has already started mobilizing its resources and unofficially launched its campaign. Traditionally, this is reflected in the implementation of large-scale social projects and initiatives, some of which raise concerns about the potential use of administrative resources for electoral gain.
- The media environment in Georgia has significantly deteriorated leading up to the elections. According to the media freedom organization Reporters Without Borders, Georgia has seen a significant decline, moving from its previous position at 103rd to 180th in media freedom rankings.
- Social media in Georgia is also highly polarized. Alongside the election campaign, various actors, including anonymous networks linked to the Government, are utilizing social media platforms for propagandistic purposes, as well as conducting campaigns that include homophobic, sexist, and other forms of discrediting content. Russia's potential intervention in the election campaign using anonymous networks poses a significant challenge. There have already been signs indicating such interference.

### 3. Political Context

The October 26 Parliamentary Elections represent a pivotal moment for Georgia's democratic development and European integration. After applying for EU membership<sup>2</sup> on March 3, 2022, the European Council acknowledged Georgia's European Perspective. In December 2023, Georgia was granted the status of an EU membership candidate country. However, to advance further and engage in accession negotiations, Georgia must fulfill nine recommendations<sup>3</sup>, with electoral reform standing out as a critical priority. Specifically, progress on the EU integration path requires:

- Ensuring a free, fair, and competitive electoral process for the 2024 parliamentary elections.
- Guaranteeing the institutional independence of the election administration.

<sup>2</sup> Civil Georgia. 03.03.2022. *The Prime Minister of Georgia Signs the EU Membership Application*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/477258>

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee of the Regions. 8.11.2023. *2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*. pp. 25-26. Accessed June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3zq1NLO>

- Implement recommendations from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the OSCE (OSCE/ODIHR) and complete election reforms well ahead of election day. These reforms must ensure that the election results accurately reflect the electorate's will.

Moreover, combating disinformation, implementing judicial reform, consulting with civil society organizations, allowing for meaningful involvement in legislative and policymaking processes, and ensuring they can operate freely are among the nine steps Georgia's Government should take.

Alongside the progress towards the EU integration path, there is a growing prevalence of anti-Western and Euroskeptic messaging in Georgia's information environment. For the first time in recent history, the ruling party has questioned Georgia's foreign policy orientation, bolstered by constitutional provisions, and sought to challenge the societal consensus on the country's European aspirations<sup>4</sup>.

Alongside pro-Russian ultra-right groups, representatives of the ruling Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia party have not hesitated to criticize Georgia's Western allies. The first wave of attempts to sow skepticism against the EU began in the summer of 2022 when Georgia did not receive EU membership candidate country status. Representatives of the ruling party and their formal split, the People's Power, have engaged in spreading conspiracies accusing the West of dragging Georgia into a war with Russia and opening a so-called "second front" in Georgia.<sup>5</sup>

After consistent formal declarations that Georgia's foreign policy direction remained unchanged, a significant shift was announced on April 29 at a rally organized by the ruling party in Tbilisi. Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder and honorary chairman of Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia, stated that a so-called "Global War party" dominates the EU and NATO. He accused the West of infiltrating its intelligence networks and attempting to influence Georgian politics. Ivanishvili's remarks suggested that Georgia may not fulfill the EU's recommendations for its membership, signaling a departure from previous commitments to European integration.<sup>6</sup>

Despite efforts by the Government and ruling party representatives to reassure Georgians of their commitment to Georgia's European integration process, recent actions by the Government and parliamentary majority increasingly undermine democratic development and neglect EU recommendations while claiming to strengthen Georgia's sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> A pivotal moment was declaring non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as instruments of foreign interests and imposing severe sanctions that posed existential challenges to them. These measures threaten to weaken Georgia's robust civil society sector, which has been cultivated over the past three decades. Additionally, the initiation of homophobic legislative changes targeting the LGBTQI community further raises concerns about Georgia's adherence to democratic principles and human rights standards.

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the Government's hostile rhetoric towards civil society organizations in Georgia, accompanied by the promotion of conspiracy theories by figures linked

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<sup>4</sup> According to the International Republican Institute's (IRI) public opinion poll conducted in September-October of 2023, 73% of Georgians fully support and 13% somewhat support Georgia's EU integration. Moreover, 65% fully support and 14% somewhat support Georgia integration to NATO.

<sup>5</sup> ISFED. 07.12.2022. Anti-Western Campaign in Georgia: New Actors, Methods and Narratives. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/eng/kvlevebi/antidasavluri-kampania-saqartveloshi-akhali-aqtorebi-metodebi-da-gzavnilebi>

<sup>6</sup> Civil Georgia. 29.04.2024. *Bidzina Ivanishvili Backs Anti-Western Policies, Threatens Repressions*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/602348>

<sup>7</sup> Civil Georgia. 30.04.2024. *GD Leaders Double Down on Anti-Western, Sovereignist, Conspiracy Rhetoric*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/602343>



to the ruling party, positioning themselves as experts, regarding the so-called Western intelligence network and its operations in Georgia<sup>8</sup>.

In February 2023, a formal split from the ruling party, People's Power, introduced the draft Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. This law proposed that all non-governmental and media organizations receiving more than 20% of their funding from foreign sources register as agents of foreign influence. Initially endorsed by Georgian Dream, the draft law faced strong societal protests and criticism from international allies. As a result, the parliamentary majority supported the law in the first reading but intentionally failed to pass it in the second reading due to widespread opposition and scrutiny.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the ruling party's promise not to reintroduce the draft law, on April 3, 2024, the Georgian Dream faction initiated an identical draft called the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence.<sup>10</sup> The label "agent of foreign influence" was replaced with "an organization pursuing the interests of a foreign power." Initially, the ruling party assured that the law would not affect individuals. Still, some of its articles now include provisions for action against individuals upon the request for information by the Ministry of Justice.<sup>11</sup>

Despite ongoing protests, massive rallies, and critical statements from the President of Georgia, the EU, EU member states, the US, UN, NATO Secretary General, the Council of Europe, OSCE, and other international actors, the Georgian Parliament proceeded to pass the re-initiated Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in May 2024 after three readings. Furthermore, on May 28, the Parliament overrode the President's veto. The Government did not heed the direct and unambiguous messages from Charles Michel,<sup>12</sup> the President of the European Council, as well as other EU politicians and Georgian allies, who stated that the law is not consistent with Georgia's European aspirations and steers the country further away from its path toward Euro-Atlantic integration.<sup>13</sup>

The draft law received severe criticism from both the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission. The OSCE/ODIHR emphasized that the law contains serious deficiencies that make it incompatible with international human rights standards, recommending its revocation.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the Venice Commission's opinion was unambiguous, strongly recommending repealing the law in its current form due to fundamental flaws that pose significant risks to democratic values.<sup>15</sup>

Notably, the new law will have an adverse effect on local election observation organizations planning to observe the October 26, 2024, Parliamentary Elections. Some of these organizations may face the risk of

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<sup>8</sup> ISFED. 09.09.2022. *Agent of the USA - A New Conspiracy Theory*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/eng/blogi/amerikis-agentebi-akhali-shetqmulebis-teoria->

<sup>9</sup> Netgazeti. 10.03.2023. *Parliament failed the Russian Law*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://netgazeti.ge/life/659642/>

<sup>10</sup> The Parliament of Georgia. *Draft Law on the Transparency of Foreign Influence*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/4eyBZdM>

<sup>11</sup> The Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence. Articles 8.3, and 9.4 <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/6171895?publication=0>

<sup>12</sup> Civil Georgia. 16.04.2024. *Charles Michel: Foreign Agents Law "Not Consistent with Georgia's EU Aspiration"*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/592459>

<sup>13</sup> Civil Georgia. 15.05.2024. *International Reactions to Final Adoption of Foreign Agents Law*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/606480>

<sup>14</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. 30.05.2024. *Urgent Opinion On The Law of Georgia "On Transparency of Foreign Influence"*. Accessed June 23, 2024. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/d/569922.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission). *Georgia: Urgent Opinion On The Law On Transparency of Foreign Influence*. Accessed June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/4eBmVfr>

being forced to cease their operations. Despite the provisions threatening fines and asset freezing<sup>16</sup> for non-registration and non-payment, Georgian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have declared their intention to defy the law, which contradicts Georgia's Constitution and fundamentally violates basic human rights and freedoms.<sup>17</sup> CSOs continue to fight against the law, including with legal mechanisms.

The legislative changes the ruling party initiated and implemented before the parliamentary elections have intensified political polarization. These changes include attempts to label CSOs and critical media as agents pursuing foreign interests, moving beyond mere rhetorical discrediting to active measures. There have been reports of violent attacks on civic activists and opposition politicians, including ambushes, physical assaults, and intimidating phone calls to their families, including minors. These actions also involve humiliation, intimidation, and vandalism of the offices and private residences of civil society representatives, suggesting an organized effort.<sup>18</sup> A member of parliament and regional secretary of the ruling party, Dimitri Samkharadze, published a video on social media showing the vandalization of CSO offices with humiliating and intimidating messages, effectively proving allegations that a politically motivated hate and intimidation campaign is being orchestrated by elements within the ruling party.<sup>19</sup>

The ruling party's introduction of constitutional changes<sup>20</sup> and the draft law<sup>21</sup> on Family Values and the Protection of Minors, specifically targeting the LGBTQI community, marks a significant regression in human rights and poses a threat to Georgia's European integration aspirations. This legislative package proposes amendments to 18 existing laws, aiming not only to curtail the rights of the LGBTQI community but also to reinforce the Government's homophobic rhetoric, which might set the tone for the upcoming election campaign.

The pre-election period is characterized by significant dissent between the President of Georgia and the ruling party. Last year, Georgian Dream attempted to impeach President Salome Zurbishvili. Despite the Constitutional Court of Georgia ruling against the President,<sup>22</sup> the impeachment failed in parliament due to insufficient votes.<sup>23</sup> The Georgian Dream's rationale for pursuing impeachment stemmed from President Zurbishvili's independent working visits to European leaders in spite of government objections. These visits aimed to garner support for granting Georgia EU membership candidate country status.

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<sup>16</sup> Radio Liberty. 03.06.2024. *Kaladze on the Foreign Agents Law: If They Don't Obey, There Will be Fines, and Asset Freezing*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32977023.html>

<sup>17</sup> Statement of the Civil Society Organizations. 30.05.2024. *We continue Legal Fight Against the Russian Law*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/eng/gantskhadebebi/vaqrdzelebt-samartlebriv-brdzolas-rusuli-kanonis-tsinaaghmdeg>

<sup>18</sup> Civil Georgia. 01.06.2024. *Intimidation Campaign Against Opposition, Civil Society, Gov't Critics as Repressions Announced by GD MPs*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/610802>

<sup>19</sup> Tabula. 31.05.2024. *The Georgian Dream Admits Sending "Titushki" to Opposition Parties and CSOs*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/718849-kartulma-otsnebam-aghara-rom-partiebtan>

<sup>20</sup> The Parliament of Georgia. Draft law on the Constitutional Amendments. Accessed on June 22, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3KZUASo>

<sup>21</sup> The Parliament of Georgia. Draft law on Defending Family Values and Minors. Accessed on June 22, 2024. <https://info.parliament.ge/#law-drafting/28703>

<sup>22</sup> Three judges didn't endorse the Constitutional Court's decision and collectively submitted a dissenting opinion on the case. Read the dissenting opinion of the members of the Plenum of the Constitutional Court of Georgia - Irine Imerlishvili, Giorgi Kverenchkhiladze and Teimuraz Tughushi regarding the conclusion №3/1/1797 dated October 16, 2023, of the Constitutional Court of Georgia. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://constcourt.ge/ka/judicial-acts?legal=15924>

<sup>23</sup> Radio Liberty. 18.10.2023. *President's Impeachment Failed*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32642769.html>

In April-May 2024, in response to widespread civil protests and demands for future actions, the President of Georgia introduced her action plan called the "Georgian Charter"<sup>24</sup> and invited political parties to make significant commitments across four key areas. The President emphasized that implementing the Charter and rebuilding trust requires the creation of a new political reality. She stressed the importance of unity around the Charter's implementation, clarifying that this does not necessitate joint electoral lists or any other form of political union.<sup>25</sup> Most major opposition political parties endorsed the Charter, with notable exceptions including Gakharia for Georgia, Girchi, and the Labor Party of Georgia.<sup>26</sup>

For the first time in Georgia's history, the US has sanctioned representatives of Georgia's legislative and executive branches of Government, which is likely to influence the tone of the pre-election campaign. The initial wave of US visa restrictions announced in early June targeted Georgian Dream members, MPs, law enforcement officials, and private citizens, although their specific identities have not been disclosed. These sanctions were prompted by Georgia's adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, which led the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to announce a reevaluation of bilateral relations between Georgia and the US.<sup>27</sup> It is noteworthy that prior to imposing sanctions on members of the legislative and executive branches, the US had already taken action against representatives of Georgia's judiciary in the spring of the previous year. Specifically, three current judges and one former judge had their US visas revoked<sup>28</sup> due to involvement in corrupt activities. Furthermore, the US sanctioned Otar Partskhaladze, a former Prosecutor General, citing his malign influence on Georgia for the benefit of Russia's interests.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The Administration of the President of Georgia. 26.05.2024. *Georgian Charter*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. [https://president.ge/index.php?m=209&news\\_id=2211&lng=eng](https://president.ge/index.php?m=209&news_id=2211&lng=eng)

<sup>25</sup> Radio Liberty. 26.05.2024. *President Introduced the Action Plan - Georgian Charter*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32964417.html>

<sup>26</sup> Publica. 03.06.2024. *Opposition politicians will sign the Georgian Charter today*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://publika.ge/qartul-qartias-opozicioneri-politikosebi-khels-dghes-moaweren/>

<sup>27</sup> InterpressNews. 06.06.2024. *The US Announced the First Tranche of Visa Restrictions Against the GD Members, MPs, Law Enforcement and Private Citizens*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3KY1mIG>

<sup>28</sup> Radio Liberty. 05.04.2024. *The US Sanctioned 4 Georgian Judges*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32350958.html>

<sup>29</sup> Radio Liberty. 15.09.2023. *Partskhaladze, Russian Special Forces and American Sanctions - What do we know so far?* Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/ALVGv>

## 4. Political Parties Ahead of the Elections

Following the 2020 Parliamentary elections, 9 electoral subjects secured seats in the 10th convocation of the Parliament of Georgia. However, later on, some of these subjects either fully or partially lost their seats due to a boycott declared after the elections and subsequent political developments. Due to the withdrawal of those lists, parties were unable to substitute elected MPs who renounced their mandates by replacing them with the next candidates from their electoral lists. Additionally, some elected MPs left their parties and began their terms representing another party or as independent members.

After the fragmentation of blocs and parties, new political groups emerged in the 10th convocation of the parliament: European Socialists, Gakharia for Georgia, and People's Power. Notably, People's Power officially registered itself as a political party on March 18, 2024. However, it originally formed as a civic movement in June 2022, comprising MPs who formally split from the ruling party.

As of June 1, 2024, Georgia's legislature consists of 139 MPs<sup>30</sup> instead of the full complement of 150, divided into two factions and 10 political groups. The parliamentary majority is composed of the Georgian Dream faction and the political group People's Power, totaling 83 MPs. The remaining 56 MPs represent the parliamentary opposition, including 8 independent MPs.

The 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia will feature political parties undergoing significant changes, including the largest opposition party, The United National Movement (UNM). In early 2023, a faction within the UNM called for extraordinary elections for its chairperson. The incumbent leader at the time, Nika Melia, was defeated by a new leader, Levan Khabeishvili, leading to internal dissent and Melia subsequently leaving the party.<sup>31</sup> After his departure, Nika Melia and the former director of Mtavari Arkhi, Nika Gvaramia, launched a New Union - Gvaramia Melia.<sup>32</sup> However, a political union of such a name 'has not yet been formally registered at the National Agency of Public Registry (NAPR).

Despite electoral blocs not being allowed for the upcoming parliamentary elections, discussions have taken place amongst political parties on the formation of political unions to account for the high electoral threshold of 5%. The UNM and Giorgi Vashadze Strategy Aghmashenebeli announced their alliance as early as July last year.<sup>33</sup> Later, in September, Droa and Girchi-More Freedom<sup>34</sup> also announced their intention to introduce a joint electoral list for the elections. Ongoing discussions among opposition parties regarding their strategy ahead of these major elections suggest that more political unions and alliances may emerge. Thus, it remains unclear exactly which electoral subjects voters will see on the ballot.

Alongside the emergence of new electoral subjects, the NAPR canceled the registration of the Conservative Movement/Alt Info party. On April 8, 2024, the NAPR revoked the decision made by the Entrepreneurs and Legal Entities Registration Department regarding the non-commercial legal entity

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<sup>30</sup> Due to the withdrawal of party lists, nine elected members of parliament from the opposition parties could not have been replaced. The mandates of two MPs elected from the single-mandate majoritarian districts (Saburtalo #3 and Zugdidi #27) were terminated at the end of last year and in February of this year. Consequently, in accordance with electoral legislation, by-elections to elect new MPs were not scheduled (as stipulated in the Election Code of Georgia, by-elections for the Parliament of Georgia shall not be held in the year of regular parliamentary elections).

<sup>31</sup> Civil Georgia. 08.12.2023. *Quits Party, Reveals Plans to Launch his Own*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/573187>

<sup>32</sup> ახალი • Ahali. 03.06.2024. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3VV0hYc>

<sup>33</sup> Netgazeti. 20.07.2023. *“Platform of Victory” - UNM and Strategy Aghmashenebeli Create an Alliance*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://netgazeti.ge/news/680989/>

<sup>34</sup> Tabula. 06.09.2023. *“The Good Choice” - Droa ad Girchi More Freedom United*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/706194-normaluri-archevani-droa-girchi-meti-tavisupleba>

registration, dated December 7, 2021.<sup>35</sup> NAPR identified several irregularities in the registration documentation.<sup>36</sup> However, the agency has not provided an explanation as to why these violations were not detected earlier during the initial registration process years ago.

The Conservative Movement/Alt Info decided to participate in the elections under the name of the Georgian Idea and submitted their request to the Central Election Commission (CEC). The CEC received a notice from the NAPR indicating that a complaint regarding the compliance of Georgian Idea's registration documents with the legislation is under review. Pending the resolution of this case, the CEC has paused the party's electoral registration procedures.<sup>37</sup>

Revoking party registrations or ceasing their registration as electoral subjects shortly before elections is concerning, as either action may potentially infringe upon political party freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution of Georgia.<sup>38</sup> Such actions could be perceived as obstructing political activities and imposing artificial barriers that undermine political pluralism. It is crucial to handle these cases with a high level of transparency, ensuring that citizens are informed about the reasons behind such decisions.

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<sup>35</sup> The "Conservative Movement" was established on November 20, 2021 during its founding convention. It was officially registered by the National Agency of Public Registry on December 7. Later, on April 11, 2022, the political union changed its name to "Conservative Movement/Alt Info."

<sup>36</sup> According to the NAPR, irregularities were found in the submitted documents, including missing signatures, incomplete member information, inconsistencies in naming, emblem discrepancies, lack of defined governance, property provisions in the charter and so forth. Read the NAPR decision #P2400027/0-1 on revoking the registration #P21000039/0-1 (07/12/2021). Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/4cyv7ey>

<sup>37</sup> The Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia. 26.04.2024. *CEC's Statement Regarding Political Association Of Citizens "Georgian Idea"*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://cesko.ge/en/siakhleebi/pres-relizebi/singleview/11033390-tseskos-gantskhadeba-mpg-is-kartuli-idea-shesakheb>

<sup>38</sup> The Constitution of Georgia. Article. 23

## 5. Legislative Framework and Electoral Reform

Ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections, Georgia has seen significant changes to its electoral legislation. However, these changes do not fully incorporate the recommendations of the Venice Commission, OSCE/ODIHR, and local election observation organizations. The complete adoption of these recommendations is a crucial aspect of Georgia's nine-step plan for EU integration.

In its assessment, OSCE/ODIHR consistently emphasizes the necessity of systemic and comprehensive reforms that should be implemented well in advance of the elections through an inclusive consultative process. OSCE/ODIHR also calls on Georgia to implement the recommendations outlined in the reports of the observation missions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).<sup>39</sup>

Notably, thorough and comprehensive electoral reform has not been implemented for many years. Reforms are often initiated and adopted hastily, without the necessary consultations and discussions, thereby disregarding pertinent recommendations. A notable issue is the limited engagement of specialized CSOs in this process.<sup>40</sup>

In its assessment, ISFED evaluates the key changes made to electoral legislation, including the transition to a new electoral system.

### 5.1. Electoral System and the Composition of Parliament

For the first time in the history of parliamentary elections in Georgia, the October 26 elections will be held under a fully proportional electoral system. All 150 MPs will be elected from single, multi-mandate electoral districts, from closed party lists. No later than 30 days before the elections, political parties will determine the sequence of their candidates on the party list. Georgian citizens of 18 years and older will elect their representatives for a four-year term at the single-chamber legislature on the basis of universal, free, equal and direct suffrage, by secret ballot.<sup>41</sup>

A significant novelty is that the incoming parliament will not only form the Government but also wield substantial influence in the election of the President of Georgia. This is because half of the 300-member electoral college responsible for electing the President comprises members of parliament.<sup>42</sup>

Under the fully proportional electoral system, the 30 mandates for majoritarian MPs will cease to exist. However, in May 2024, the parliamentary majority initiated further changes by introducing the concept

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<sup>39</sup> European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) & OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. 18.12.2023. *Joint Opinion on the Draft Amendments to the Election Code and to the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament of Georgia*. Accessed June 23, 2024. [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2023\)047-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2023)047-e)

<sup>40</sup> ISFED. 18.08.2022. *The Ruling Party Blocked ISFED's Participation in the Working Group on Electoral Issues*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/eng/gantskhadebebi/mmartvelma-partiam-dabloka-samartiani-archevnebis-monatsileoba-saarchevno-sakitkhebeze-sheqmnil-samushao-djgufshi>

<sup>41</sup> Constitution of Georgia. Article 37.1-2

<sup>42</sup> For the first time in history, the President of Georgia will be elected to a 5-year term without debates, by the 300 members of the electoral college. This college includes 150 members of parliament and representatives from the supreme representative bodies of the autonomous republics of Abkhazia and Adjara. Additional members will be nominated by political parties from local government councils based on quotas set by the CEC in the organic law. Consequently, members of parliament will play a significant role in the presidential election process. Constitution of Georgia, Article 50.

of Delegates.<sup>43</sup> According to these changes, a party can designate a candidate as a delegate for one of the 30 districts specified in Annex #3 of the proposed law upon submission of their electoral list. Once designated as a candidate delegate, an MP holds this status from the beginning to the end of their term. An MP becomes a delegate if their party receives the highest number of votes in the respective district. Importantly, the geographical mandate of a delegate corresponds to the same 30 majoritarian districts that were in place for the 2020 parliamentary elections.

ISFED assesses such a change as contradictory to the rationale of the proportional electoral system envisioned by the Constitution, which centers around a single multi-mandate electoral district. Furthermore, this change fails to guarantee genuine regional representation in the legislature because it lacks a clear institutional connection between constituents and delegates, both in voting and in the allocation of mandates. This alteration has the potential to confuse constituents. Importantly, local needs and issues, according to decentralization standards, should be addressed by local government bodies.<sup>44</sup>

With electoral blocs prohibited in parliamentary elections, there is now a 5% entry threshold, representing a substantial increase from the previous parliamentary elections where individual political parties only needed to surpass a 1% threshold to get a mandate.

On April 19, 2021, a political agreement mediated<sup>45</sup> by Charles Michel proposed a 2% entry barrier for the next two parliamentary elections. Parliament initiated a constitutional amendment<sup>46</sup> to implement this change, passed<sup>47</sup> in the first reading. However, Georgian Dream later reneged on its commitment to honor the agreement. CSOs criticized this reversal because reducing the electoral threshold is seen as beneficial for Georgia, allowing for a more accurate representation of constituents' political will and promoting pluralism<sup>48</sup> in the legislature. The ruling party had initially been willing to lower the threshold to 2%, contingent upon Georgia being granted candidate country status for EU membership by December 2022.<sup>49</sup> However, since Georgia did not receive this status by then, the consideration of the amendments was repeatedly postponed.

There have been significant changes in the rules for party registration, particularly concerning the name of the electoral subject<sup>50</sup> and the inclusion of members of a separate party on one party's electoral list. Under the new regulations, when a party submits registration documents to the CEC chairperson to participate in elections, it must specify its name exactly as it appears in the party's statute or a shortened

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<sup>43</sup> Organic Law of Georgia “On the Changes to the Organic Law of Election Code of Georgia” 4171-XIV06-X03. 29.05.2024. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/6164944?publication=0#DOCUMENT:1>

<sup>44</sup> ISFED. 28.03.2024. *ISFED's Statement on the Changes Initiated in the Election Code of Georgia*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/4czqr8k>

<sup>45</sup> Diplomatic Service of the European Union. *Georgia's Future Way*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. [www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/mediacia\\_samomavlo\\_qza\\_sakartvelostvis.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/mediacia_samomavlo_qza_sakartvelostvis.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> The Parliament of Georgia. *Georgia's Constitutional Law: Draft Bill on the Constitutional Amendments*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillReviewContent/282183?>

<sup>47</sup> The Parliament of Georgia. 07.09.2021. *Parliament Passed the Constitutional Amendments in the first Reading with 126 Votes*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. [https://parliament.ge/en/media/news/126-khmit-parlamentma-pirveli-mosmenit-sakonstitutsio-tsvlilebebs-mkhari-dauchira?fbclid=IwAR2dmTE0-Ck5sYqH\\_k9UB23tbm589EyS0wqNPYPhrxML6sMMzr2UEnfXd4g](https://parliament.ge/en/media/news/126-khmit-parlamentma-pirveli-mosmenit-sakonstitutsio-tsvlilebebs-mkhari-dauchira?fbclid=IwAR2dmTE0-Ck5sYqH_k9UB23tbm589EyS0wqNPYPhrxML6sMMzr2UEnfXd4g)

<sup>48</sup> Joint Statements of the Civil Society Organizations. 01.12.2021. *NGOs Negatively Assess Irakli Kobakhidze's Statement on Constitutional Amendments*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.isfed.ge/eng/gantskhadebebi/arasamtavrobo-organizatsiebi-sakonstitutsio-tsvlilebebtan-dakavshirebit-irakli-kobakhidzis-gantskhadebas-uarkofitad-afaseben>

<sup>49</sup> Radio Liberty. 07.07.2022. *The Georgian Dream is Ready to Lower the Threshold to 2% if the EU Grants the Membership Candidate Status to the Country*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31933067.html>

<sup>50</sup> Organic Law “Election Code of Georgia”. Article 113.3.a

version. Additionally, the registration documentation allows the party to reference its name using specific words or abbreviations derived from the name as stated in the statute or its shortened version without adding any additional words, abbreviations, or punctuation. Notably, the registered name will appear unchanged on the ballot paper. Earlier, in addition to the party name, as it appears in the statute, parties could add names and surnames or just surnames of no more than their three leaders.

Furthermore, parties are now prohibited from including candidates in their electoral lists who are members of other parties. Specifically, a candidate listed in an electoral list who is a member of another party registered under the Georgian Organic Law on Political Associations of Citizens will not be registered. If already registered, such a candidate will face deregistration by the decision of the CEC chairperson.<sup>51</sup> Given that electoral blocs are banned, and there is a 5% electoral threshold, ISFED assessed that these restrictions on party names and the inclusion of members from other parties in their lists might pose additional challenges for opposition political parties.

The 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia will proceed without gender quotas following the adoption of Girchi's initiative. This initiative repealed the relevant article in the Election Code of Georgia, which mandated that every fourth candidate on electoral lists in the October 26 parliamentary elections should have been a woman. Additionally, the subsequent parliamentary elections in 2028 and 2032 were required to have at least one woman for every three candidates on the list. These changes were made through amendments to Georgia's Organic Law on Political Associations of Citizens, which also eliminated a financial incentive of 30% in additional funding aimed at promoting the representation of women on electoral lists. Despite the President's veto of the draft law, parliament successfully overrode it, implementing these changes.<sup>52</sup>

The repeal of the gender quota contradicts the 2017 constitutional changes in Georgia, which impose a positive obligation on the state to implement special measures ensuring substantive equality of men and women and to eliminate inequality.<sup>53</sup> This change is expected to negatively impact women's participation in politics and hinder their pursuit of real equality. It is noteworthy that in 2020, the OSCE/ODIHR positively assessed the introduction of gender quotas as a step forward towards achieving more balanced representation in the legislature.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Organic Law "Election Code of Georgia". Article 117.4.b

<sup>52</sup> The Parliament of Georgia. 15.05.2024. *Parliament Overrode the President of Georgia's Veto on the Proposed Changes to the Election Code of Georgia Regarding the Cancellation of Gender Quota*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://parliament.ge/en/media/news/parlamentma-saarchevno-kodeksshi-gankhortsielebul-tsvlilebastan-dakavshirebit-romeliits-genderuli-kvotirebis-gaukmebas-itvalistsinebs-prezidentis-motivirebul-shenishvnebs-mkhari-ar>

<sup>53</sup> Joint Statement of Civil Society Organizations. *Revoking Mandatory Gender Quotas Contradicts the Will of the Georgian People Enshrined in the Constitution, Violates Women's Rights, and Poses a Hurdle to Eurointegration Efforts*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3VXHmME>

<sup>54</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. 28 August 2020. *Georgia: Parliamentary Elections 31 October 2020 - ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report*. Accessed June 23, 2024. [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/9/461779\\_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/9/461779_0.pdf)



## 5.2. Political Party Finance

Georgia's legislation governing political party finance has seen significant changes in recent years. There are two primary sources of funding for political parties: state funding and donations.<sup>55</sup> As of December 15, 2023, amendments to Georgia's Organic Law on Political Associations of Citizens have banned donations from legal entities, except when providing space for conducting lectures, seminars, or similar public events free of charge.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the total annual expenditure cap for political parties and electoral candidates has been reduced. Parties are now restricted from exceeding total annual expenditures of 0.04% of Georgia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the previous year. This cap includes both expenditures directly made by the party and those made in favor of the party, as defined by the LEPL Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB).<sup>57</sup> Previously, the annual expenditure cap for parties was set at 0.05% of the GDP of the previous year, and before that, it was 0.1%. These changes reflect ongoing adjustments in Georgia's efforts to regulate and limit political party expenditures and funding sources.

Setting a cap on annual party spending has been assessed positively by election observer organizations, including ISFED, although its effectiveness remains uncertain. While this measure addresses concerns regarding excessive spending, it does not adequately resolve the substantial financial inequality between ruling and opposition parties. This situation underscores the need for more comprehensive reforms in political financing regulations.<sup>58</sup> For instance, based on Georgia's GDP in 2023,<sup>59</sup> the maximum cap for party expenses in 2024 amounts to 32 million GEL.

A party is eligible for state funding if it garners at least 1% of votes in the latest parliamentary elections. Political parties in Georgia criticize that eligibility for state funding is defined only on their performance in parliamentary elections.<sup>60</sup>

In 2021, amendments to the Organic Law on Political Associations of Citizens stipulated that a political party in Georgia would lose its state funding if it failed to take up at least half of the parliamentary mandates it had won. This means a party would be ineligible for state funding if its elected members did not take up their mandates and could not be replaced by subsequent candidates from the party list.<sup>61</sup> As a result of this regulation, the Labor Party of Georgia and Lelo for Georgia were denied state funding. Local election observer organizations, along with the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR, have assessed that this restriction on the distribution of public funding is unjust and does not align with international standards.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> ISFED. September, 2023. *Challenges to Election Campaign Finance in Georgia*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/eng/kvlevebi/saarchevno-kampaniis-finansuri-gamotsvevebi-saqartveloshi>

<sup>56</sup> Organic Law of Georgia "Political Association of Citizens". Article 26.1.a-b

<sup>57</sup> Organic Law of Georgia "Political Association of Citizens". Article 25<sup>1</sup>

<sup>58</sup> ISFED & Transparency International - Georgia & Georgia's Young Lawyers Association (GYLA). January, 2023. *Assessment of the Changes to the Electoral Legislation Implemented in December 2022*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/eng/angarishebi/saarchevno-kanonmdeblobashi-2022-tslis-dekembershi-shetanili-tsvlilebebis-shefaseba>

<sup>59</sup> According to GeoStat, Georgia's GDP amounted 80.2 billion GEL in 2023: <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/23/mtliani-shida-produkti-mshp>

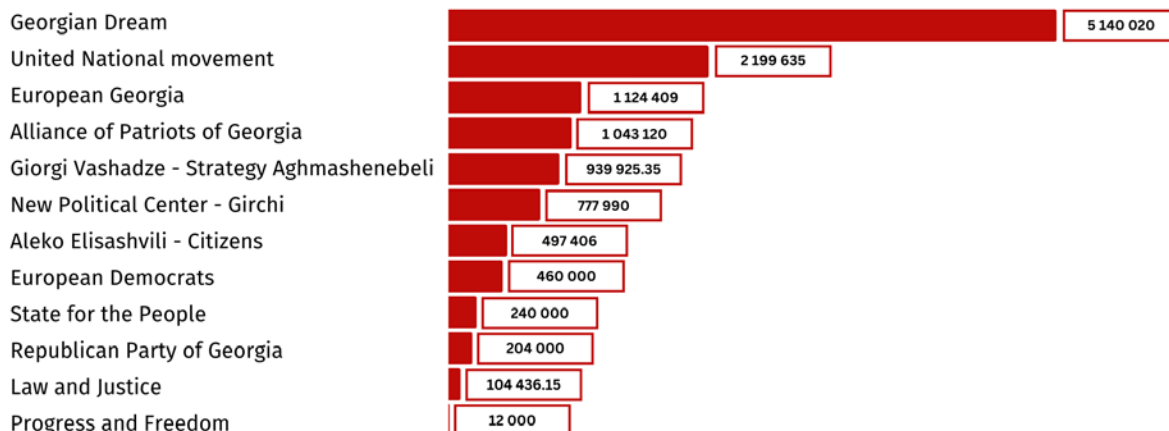
<sup>60</sup> ISFED. September 2023. *Financial Challenges to Election Campaign in Georgia*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/geo/kvlevebi/saarchevno-kampaniis-finansuri-gamotsvevebi-saqartveloshi>

<sup>61</sup> Organic Law of Georgia "Political Association of Citizens". Article 30.5

<sup>62</sup> ISFED. *Assessment of the Changes to the Electoral Legislation Implemented in December 2022*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/eng/angarishebi/saarchevno-kanonmdeblobashi-2022-tslis-dekembershi-shetanili-tsvlilebebis-shefaseba>

Based on the votes received in the 2020 parliamentary elections, 12 political parties in Georgia got the right to have state funding. Annually, these parties collectively receive 12,742,942 GEL from the state budget. It is worth noting that 40% of these funds are allocated to Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia, while the remaining 60% is distributed among the other 11 parties.<sup>63</sup>

## Annual State Funding of Political Parties (GEL)



**Source:** The Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia

In 2023, the responsibility for monitoring political party finance in Georgia was transferred from the State Audit Office (SAO) to the ACB. Following this change, concerns have been raised about the institutional independence of the ACB, particularly regarding the appointment of its head. According to the law, the head of the ACB is appointed by the Prime Minister for a term of 6 years.<sup>64</sup> To ensure the independence of this institution, it is crucial that the ACB's head is elected through a qualified majority in parliament.

According to amendments in the Law on Political Associations of Citizens, the ACB was granted the authority to request the NAPR to revoke a party's registration if it fails to submit financial declarations for two consecutive calendar years or if its revenue and expenditures remain at zero for two years. The party's assets would be transferred to the state budget in such cases.<sup>65</sup> ISFED has questioned the proportionality of these sanctions introduced through the amendments.

Sanctions for violations of the requirements established by this law, particularly regarding the use of administrative resources or official positions during canvassing and election campaigning, have been strengthened. Fines now range from GEL 2,000 to GEL 4,000, compared to a previous flat rate of GEL

<sup>63</sup> The Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia. 2022. Political Party Finance: Annex of the Ordinance № 25/2022 of the CEC Chairperson Issued on February 28, 2022. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/2qb4T>

<sup>64</sup> Law of Georgia "On the Fight Against Corruption". Article 20<sup>16</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Organic Law of Georgia "Political Association of Citizens". Article . Article 24<sup>1</sup>

2,000.<sup>66</sup> While enhancing sanctions for abusing administrative resources is a positive measure, the real issue lies in the ineffective enforcement of existing laws.

### 5.3. Electronic Technologies

The integration of electronic technologies in the vote-casting and tabulation processes for the 2024 parliamentary elections represents a significant innovation.<sup>67</sup> While these technologies have been piloted a few times before and are somewhat familiar to certain segments of Georgian society, this election marks their first large-scale adoption. Up to 90% of registered voters at approximately 70% of polling stations will utilize these new technologies during the upcoming elections.

Voter registration, vote casting, and tabulation for the 2024 parliamentary elections will all incorporate new technology. Ballot papers at polling stations without integrated technologies will be digitalized. Additionally, alongside electronic vote counting, votes will be counted manually. In polling stations where electronic technologies are employed, the maximum number of voters per polling station is defined as 3000, compared to the previous limit of 1500.

ISFED observed the piloting of electronic technologies during by-elections and extraordinary elections in 2022 and 2023. While the vote-casting process generally proceeded smoothly, there were some irregularities in voter verification and deficiencies in the operation of ballot-counting machines. ISFED publicly shared its findings from these observations.<sup>68</sup>

Instances of voter verification issues and malfunctioning ballot-counting machines hindered the voting process. Additionally, some members of the election commission, especially early in the election day, struggled to operate the electronic technologies and had to seek assistance from senior commission members. In some cases, the designated space for polling stations was inadequate for the smooth functioning of the election commission. Furthermore, there were instances where the secrecy of the vote was compromised. Such instances specifically occurred during attempts to insert ballot papers into the counting machines and in the process of handling the spoiled ones.<sup>69</sup> As a result of ISFED's observations, the CEC considered ISFED's recommendation and introduced a mechanism for dealing with spoiled ballot papers while ensuring the secrecy of the votes cast.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Organic Law of Georgia "Election Code of Georgia". Article 88.1

<sup>67</sup> Organic Law of Georgia "Election Code of Georgia". Chapter VIII<sup>1</sup> - Conducting Polling/Elections Using Electronic Means.

<sup>68</sup> ISFED 2023. *Summary Assessment Report of the Extraordinary/By-Elections Held on April 29, 2023*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.isfed.ge/eng/2023-shualeduri-riggareshe/2023-archevnebi>

<sup>69</sup> ISFED, 2022. *Evaluation of the 2022 By-Elections of the Parliament of Georgia and the City Council of Batumi Municipality*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.isfed.ge/eng/angarishebi/saqartvelos-parlamentisa-da-galaq-batumis-munitsipalitetis-sakrebulo-2022-tslis-shualeduri-archevnebis-shefaseba>; ISFED 2023. *Summary Assessment Report of the Election Day of the Extraordinary/By-Elections Held on April 29, 2023*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.isfed.ge/eng/2023-shualeduri-riggareshe/2023-archevnebi>

<sup>70</sup> "If a ballot is not accepted by the vote counting machine on the first attempt, the voter is allowed to insert it a second time. If the ballot is rejected again, it will be deemed spoiled. The voter will then witness the cutting of one corner of the ballot and it will be folded with the metal holder in such a way that the secrecy of the cast vote is maintained. The ballot will be labeled as spoiled and verified with the signature of the precinct election commission chairperson." Ordinance №7/2023 issued by the Central Election Commission on February 6, 2023, regarding the rules and procedures for voting using electronic technologies. Article. 6.2.t. <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5713266?publication=7>

Electronic technologies play a positive role in simplifying the voting process and reducing human errors. However, due to the extensive implementation of this innovation, a comprehensive public information campaign is essential. Ensuring adequate space at polling stations for efficient voting remains a challenge. Additionally, managing an increased voter turnout poses logistical challenges for election commission members, as the technological advancements do not substantially reduce voting time. Moreover, it is crucial to ensure the secrecy of the vote and enhance public trust in the election processes through these electronic technologies.

Initially, the use of electronic technologies required voters to possess electronic ID cards or passports. However, changes to the Election Code implemented in December 2023 allow voters to hold legally effective electronic and non-electronic personal identity cards and a Georgian passport.<sup>71</sup> Starting from July 1, 2024, non-electronic, laminated ID cards will be declared invalid, with only a few exceptions permitted. Citizens can obtain a new electronic ID card free of charge to comply with these requirements.

## 5.4. Election Administration

### *The CEC's Composition*

Establishing the CEC composition based on consensus remains a persistent challenge. Despite several revisions, the fundamental issue surrounding the election of the CEC chairperson and non-party (professional) members remains unresolved. This situation underscores concerns regarding the potential influence of one party over the election administration.

The election of professional members of the CEC through a high quorum, achieved through consensus and collaboration between political parties, lies at the heart of electoral reform ambitions. It also represents one of the key conditions outlined in the political agreement reached on April 19, 2021, mediated by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel. The Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODHR have consistently criticized the lack of independence of the CEC.

According to the April 19, 2021 agreement, it was stipulated that two-thirds (100) of the total parliamentary votes would be required to elect the professional members of the CEC, while the deputy chairperson would represent the opposition party. In case of failure to elect the chairperson twice with a two-thirds majority and on the third attempt with three-fifths of the total votes, the chairperson would be elected through a simple majority for a limited term of six months.<sup>72</sup> Despite initially adopting these regulations, the ruling party has subsequently amended the rules multiple times and deviated from their commitments. Specifically, in the summer of 2023, amendments to the Election Code and the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament of Georgia reduced the quorum needed to elect the chairperson and the seven professional members of the CEC for a full 5-year term. Instead of requiring two-thirds of the votes, the chairperson and the seven members can now be elected with a simple parliamentary majority. These changes also diminished the role of the President of Georgia in the process. The authority to form the selection commission for CEC members and to introduce selected candidates to parliament was transferred from the President to the Speaker of the Parliament. The President's authority is now limited

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<sup>71</sup> Organic Law of Georgia on the Changes to the Organic Law "Election Code of Georgia". Article 1. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5999612?publication=0#DOCUMENT:1>

<sup>72</sup> European Union External Action Service. *Georgia's Future Way*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. [www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/mediacia\\_samomavlo\\_gza\\_sakartvelostvis.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/mediacia_samomavlo_gza_sakartvelostvis.pdf)

to appointing only one member of the nine-member selection commission that determines the composition of the CEC.<sup>73</sup>

ISFED assessed these changes<sup>74</sup> as part of a continuing trend where the ruling party consolidates power, gaining disproportionate influence in the election of professional members of the CEC. These amendments effectively sideline the role of the President of Georgia in determining the CEC's composition, relegating it to a minor and symbolic role to avoid any constitutional violation.<sup>75</sup>

On December 19, 2023, the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR published their opinion on the implemented changes in 2023 and the planned amendments regarding the appointment of professional members and the chairperson of the CEC. The opinion emphasizes the significance of adhering to the rule requiring a two-thirds majority of parliamentary votes, as well as the adoption of an anti-deadlock mechanism as outlined in the Charles Michel agreement. Critically, the opinion expresses disapproval of stripping the President of the authority to nominate and select candidates for the CEC membership.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the critical assessments from the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR, the rules governing the composition of the CEC were changed again in 2024. Similar to the previous version, the authority to elect the CEC chairperson and the professional members for their full term of five years remained with the Speaker of Parliament instead of the President. However, instead of requiring a simple majority (76 votes), the new edition now stipulates that three-fifths (90 votes) of parliamentary votes are necessary. If this threshold is not met, parliament can elect them with 76 votes within two attempts.<sup>77</sup> ISFED assesses these changes as largely symbolic and merely representing a formality, asserting that they still allow the ruling party substantial power in electing CEC members.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the rule mandating the election of the vice chairperson from among the opposition-appointed members of the CEC has been eliminated.

On April 30, 2024, the Parliament voted in favor of Giorgi Kalandarishvili as the CEC chairperson, along with three other members: Maia Zaridze, Giorgi Sharabidze, and Gia Tsatsashvili. Before the vote, representatives of the ruling party and Girchi verbally agreed that the ruling party would support Girchi's proposal to eliminate gender quotas in exchange for Girchi's support for their candidates in the election administration, ensuring their approval with a high quorum.<sup>79</sup> However, despite Girchi's support, the CEC chairman and members were not voted in with the required three-fifths (⅔) of parliamentary votes.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Organic Law of Georgia on the Changes to the Organizational Law "Election Code of Georgia". <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5825872?publication=0#DOCUMENT:1>

<sup>74</sup> ISFED. *The Ruling Party Tailors the CEC Composition Rule to Its Partisan Interests*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.isfed.ge/eng/qantskhadebebi/mmartveli-partia-tseskos-tavmdjdomarisa-da-profesiuli-tsevrebis-archevis-tsess-sakutar-interest-arrebs>

<sup>75</sup> According to point "d" of Section 1 of the 52nd Article of Georgia's Constitution, the President plays a role in electing the CEC Chairperson and its members according to the instances prescribed in the relevant organic laws.

<sup>76</sup> European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) & OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. 18.12.2023. *Joint Opinion on the Draft amendments to the Election Code and to the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament of Georgia*. Accessed June 23, 2024. [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2023\)047-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2023)047-e)

<sup>77</sup> Rules of Procedures of the Parliament of Georgia, Article 211<sup>1</sup>

<sup>78</sup> ISFED. *The Rule for Electing the CEC Chairperson and Professional Members is not Improved Substantially*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.isfed.ge/eng/qantskhadebebi/samartliani-archevnebis-gantskhadeba-saqartvelos-parlamentshi-initsiirebuli-kanonproeqtebis-shesakheb-romelta-tanakhmadats-itsvleba-tseskos-dakompleqtebis-tses>

<sup>79</sup> Civil Georgia. 12.04.2024. *GD, Girchi Deal to Abolish Women's Quotas*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/589535>

<sup>80</sup> Radio Liberty. 30.04.2024. *Parliament Elected the CEC Chairman for 5 Years Term, with the Rules of Amended Election Code*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32927745.html>

Despite numerous changes, the CEC composition rule does not address the key challenge currently faced by the CEC – a lack of trust. Its independence is questionable and contracts the recommendations proposed by the EU, the Venice Commission, and the OSCE/ODIHR. One of the nine steps put forward by the European Commission following Georgia being granted EU membership candidate status on December 14, 2023, specifically emphasizes the need to ensure the independence of the CEC. This condition remains unaddressed.

### Other Changes

In 2024, the Parliament dissolved the consultative group at the CEC, which was established as part of the electoral reform in 2021. This group included representatives from the Public Defender of Georgia and experts from local and international election-focused organizations. Its role was to provide recommendations to the CEC on handling election disputes.<sup>81</sup> Back in 2021, ISFED decided not to participate in the commission responsible for establishing the consultative group ahead of local government elections. This decision stemmed from concerns that neither the invited organizations nor the selection rules would ensure the appointment of qualified and trustworthy candidates based on consensus.<sup>82</sup> Notably, the consultative group was originally envisioned in the political agreement brokered through Charles Michel's mediation. It aimed to create an inclusive and specialized body comprising the Ombudsman's office and credible local and international experts to advise the CEC on election dispute resolution. Had the group been composed of trustworthy and credible members, it could have played a constructive role in addressing election disputes more fairly.

Changes to the Election Code implemented on December 29, 2022, significantly affected the norms regulating the selection of lower levels of election administration. A new certification requirement was introduced for members of Precinct Election Commissions (PEC). Previously, certification was only mandatory for central and district election commission (DEC) members. Under the new rules, there are two types of certification: one for regular members and another for leadership (such as the chairperson, deputy chairperson, and secretary) of PECs. Professional members of a PEC are exempt from certification if they already hold an election administration officer's certificate or the certificate of a PEC leadership. However, the certification requirement does not apply to commissions created in exceptional cases, commissions formed abroad, or in cases where a substitute member is selected to fill a vacant spot due to early termination of a PEC member's term.<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, changes to the Election Code specify criteria for the eligibility of professional members of election commissions. Specifically, the following individuals are ineligible to be elected as members of District and Precinct Election Commissions:

- a) a person who, since the calling of any of the last two general elections or the last two by-elections, has served as a party-appointed member of an election commission, an electoral subject, or a representative of an electoral subject.

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<sup>81</sup> Ordinance No44/2021 of the CEC Georgia, issued on July 29, 2021 regarding the decree of adopting the rules of establishing CEC consultative group. Article 2. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5226832?publication=0>

<sup>82</sup> ISFED & Transparency International Georgia, 08.08.2021. *TI Georgia and ISFED are Leaving the Process of Staffing the CEC Advisory Group*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/eng/gantskhadebebi/tsekos-sakonsultatsio-djufis-dakompleqtebis-protsess-ori-arasamtavrobo-organizatsia-tovebs>

<sup>83</sup> Organic Law of Georgia "Election Code of Georgia". Article 24. 25<sup>1</sup>

b) a person who has donated to any party from the beginning of the year in which the last general elections were conducted or from the beginning of the year in which the last by-elections were conducted.<sup>84</sup>

While the introduction of the certification rule and eligibility criteria aims to enable the election of qualified and impartial members to election commissions, in practice, the influence of the ruling party over district and central election commissions, coupled with the procedural formality of electing PEC members, diminishes the potential impact of these changes.

The Parliament has approved, in three readings, amendments to the decision-making procedures of the CEC. Specifically, if the CEC fails to reach a decision with at least two-thirds (12 votes) of the total available votes, the same decision can be reconsidered at the same session and will be deemed adopted if supported by a simple majority (9 votes).<sup>85</sup> This shift allows for decisions to be made with a simple majority instead of a qualified majority, impacting critical aspects of the election process such as the cancellation of decisions by lower-level election commissions, including results from district/precinct commissions, the decision on opening and recount of ballots received from PECs, and the decision on election of DEC members. Crucially, decisions requiring a two-thirds majority are vital for the entire election process, and while these changes aim to expedite decision-making, they potentially reduce opportunities for consensus-based decisions. Notably, the President of Georgia vetoed the legislative changes,<sup>86</sup> but the Parliament's Legal Issues Committee successfully overrode it.<sup>87</sup>

Legislative changes adopted in 2021 initially outlined the procedures for opening election documentation and recounting election results. Additional specifics were introduced in 2022, including the introduction of criteria for a recount when there are discrepancies in the summary protocols:

- If the sum of invalidated ballots and votes cast for electoral subjects exceeds by 5 or more the total number of voters who participated in the election as indicated in the summary protocol of voting results compiled by the PEC;
- If the sum of invalidated ballots and votes cast for electoral subjects is 10 or more less than the total number of voters who participated in the election as indicated in the summary protocol of voting results compiled by the PEC.<sup>88</sup>

Establishing clear rules for opening election documentation and conducting recounts is crucial for instilling trust in election results. However, ISFED advocates for a mandatory recount of all polling station results by DEC members whenever there is even a one-vote discrepancy (surplus) in the summary protocol.

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<sup>84</sup> Organic Law of Georgia on the Changes to the Organizational Law "Election Code of Georgia". Article. 1.4, 1.16.

<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5654102?publication=0#DOCUMENT:1>;

<sup>85</sup> The Parliament of Georgia. 30.05.2024. *Parliament Passed the Organic Law in the Third Reading on the Changes to the Election Code of Georgia*. Accessed on June 23, 2024.

<https://parliament.ge/en/media/news/parlamentma-sakartvelos-saarchevno-kodeksshi-tsvlilebis-shetanis-shesakheborganuli-kanonproekti-mesame-mosmenit-miigho>

<sup>86</sup> The Parliament of Georgia. 13.06.2024. *Draft law: President of Georgia's Veto on the Proposed Changes (May 30, 2024, №4238-XIVობ-Χოვ) to the Election Code of Georgia (Registration number №07-3/443; 02.05.2024)*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://info.parliament.ge/?fbclid=IwAR12I5G3YNKPhzWB-J9YM7oFAsmnaU8Eiu1utQzdlzvbS7K2O1sFbdiCLYo#law-drafting/28771>

<sup>87</sup> The Parliament of Georgia. 21.06.2024. *The Legal Issues Committee Overrode the President's Veto on the Proposed in the Election Code of Georgia*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://parliament.ge/en/media/news/iuridiul-sakitkhtakomitetma-saarchevno-kodeksshi-shetani-tsvlilebaze-prezidentis-motivirebul-shenishvnebs-mkhari-ar-dauchira>

<sup>88</sup> Organic Law of Georgia "Election Code of Georgia". Article 21 d<sup>3</sup>-d<sup>4</sup>

The changes to the Election Code also address the requirement for inking in cases of voting with a mobile ballot box. Previously, inking was only mandatory at polling stations. According to assessments by the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR, this norm enhances preventive measures against repeated voting by an individual, which is viewed as a positive development.<sup>89</sup>

Furthermore, the timeline for submitting complaints regarding the vote-casting and tabulation processes has been extended. Now, complaints can be submitted within three days instead of two. Consequently, the period for reviewing complaints by the DEC's has also been extended. This change potentially lengthens the overall timeline for providing election results.

Additionally, there have been changes to the rules governing registration as an election observation organization outside the official pre-election period, as defined by the CEC decree adopted on March 18, 2024. Election observer registrations issued during non-election periods are immediately suspended upon the start of a pre-election period and reinstated promptly after the election period concludes.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) & OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. *Joint Opinion*. CDL-AD(2022)047, 19.12.2022, §63

<sup>90</sup> Ordinance №5/2024 of the Central Election Commission of Georgia, issued on March 18, 2024, regarding the rule of registration of observers of election observation organization in the non-election period. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/6133117?publication=0>



## 6. Voter Registration and Vote Casting by Those Living Abroad

In recent years, the significant increase in emigration from Georgia, particularly among those of voting age, has made their participation in the 2024 elections a highly relevant issue. The exact number<sup>91</sup> of Georgian citizens living abroad is unknown, as a considerable number are either unregistered or residing abroad illegally.

Voter data on voter lists typically includes their registered place of residence. For voters living abroad, their registration address is determined by the diplomatic mission or consulate where they have officially registered. Polling stations are set up in diplomatic missions or consulate offices no later than 30 days before the elections, provided there are at least 50 registered voters. To vote, individuals must appear at the designated polling station on election day, which could be located within a diplomatic mission or consulate premises.

Emigrants interviewed by ISFED express a strong desire to participate in elections despite facing significant challenges. One major obstacle they cite is the long distance to the polling stations, compounded by the fear of deportation due to their illegal residence abroad.

The President of Georgia advocates for a streamlined procedure for voters living abroad and has established a working group involving relevant state bodies, civil society groups, and diaspora representatives. However, notably, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is not actively participating in this initiative led by the President. The President has emphasized the crucial need for cooperation between the MFA and the CEC and expressed concerns about mutual finger-pointing rather than collaboration.<sup>92</sup> In response to societal concerns, the CEC has stated that, according to the law, the CEC is permitted to establish polling stations based on data provided by the MFA.<sup>93</sup>

The voter turnout rate among those residing abroad has been considerably low in recent elections. According to the CEC, in 2020, a total of 66,217 voters were registered in the special lists for polling stations opened abroad, but only 12,247 of them actually cast their votes.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, in the 2018 Presidential elections, out of 58,576 registered voters abroad, only 5,675 participated in the first round. Out of 64,735 registered voters in the runoff, only 9,921 turned up at polling stations.<sup>95</sup> These figures underscore the significant challenges voters living abroad face in exercising their right to participate in elections. Therefore, reducing and simplifying the barriers to their participation is crucial, ensuring their constitutional rights are upheld and that the Georgian diaspora is actively engaged in the country's social and political processes.

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<sup>91</sup> On September 13, the research center PMC published its recent study titled "Emigration and the Impact of Remittances on Georgia's Economy." The study reported a 7% increase in Georgian emigrants from 2010 to 2020, indicating that 23% of Georgia's population has emigrated during this period. Referenced by Civil Georgia. *Study Shows 23% of Georgian Population has Emigrated in a Decade*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/508109>

<sup>92</sup> Civil Georgia. 29.03.2024. *President Criticizes MFA for Declining to Streamline Emigrant Voting*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/589233>

<sup>93</sup> Civil Georgia. 2024. *CEC Reacts to "Ballot box in your city" Campaign*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/575152>

<sup>94</sup> The Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia. *Statistical Data of Voters in the First Round and Runoffs of 2020 Parliamentary Election*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/4cxqbgq>

<sup>95</sup> The CEC Georgia. *Statistical Data of Voters in the First Round and Runoff of the Presidential Election*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. [https://cesko.ge/static/res/docs/monacile\\_I\\_II\\_turi.pdf](https://cesko.ge/static/res/docs/monacile_I_II_turi.pdf)

## 7. Media Environment

Most Georgian voters rely on traditional media for political news and updates on election developments. Therefore, it is critically important that the media covers election-related processes balanced and unbiasedly. Both traditional and online media organizations should be able to fulfill their professional duty smoothly and provide the electorate with accurate information.

The media environment ahead of the parliamentary elections has significantly deteriorated, largely due to the adoption of the Foreign Agents Law and its subsequent developments. This law categorizes critical and credible online media organizations as foreign agents if they receive grant funding from Western allies.

According to the Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontières – RSF), Georgia's ranking has significantly regressed over the past year, currently standing at 103rd place out of 180 countries. In comparison, Georgia held the 77th position in 2023.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, Georgia's press freedom index score deteriorated from 61.69 to 53.05 over the same period.<sup>97</sup>

Numerous representatives of media organizations were harmed during massive demonstrations against the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence.<sup>98</sup> Cases of intimidation, physical assault, and pressure have increased recently. According to the Journalistic Ethics Charter of Georgia, journalists and their family members received intimidating and terrorizing phone calls, while media organization offices and private residences were vandalized with humiliating placards. Violent groups also damaged journalists' private assets. In one instance, a journalist and their interviewee were violently attacked at the premises of a diplomatic mission.<sup>99</sup> The organized and systematic nature of these attacks, coupled with a sense of impunity and access to citizens' personal information by the attackers, suggests they are backed by the ruling party, according to the Journalistic Charter of Georgia.<sup>100</sup>

According to Georgia's Journalistic Ethics Charter, 22 journalists were obstructed from executing their professional duties. Some of them were physically assaulted, some were verbally humiliated, and others were harmed using specialized equipment.<sup>101</sup>

In 2023, there were also 45 reported cases of violence, intimidation, and harassment of media representatives in Tbilisi and the regions.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> There are five assessment indicators used: political, legal, economic, security, and social. In all of these aspects, Georgia's standing has worsened. The assessment highlights a hostile environment for independent and opposition media, with reported cases of physical and verbal attacks on journalists. Additionally, the ranking assesses the introduction of laws aimed at marginalizing independent media and restricting free speech. Reporters Without Borders. 2024. *Georgia*. Accessed June 23, 2024. <https://rsf.org/en/country/georgia>

<sup>97</sup> Reporters Without Borders. 2024. *Georgia*. Accessed June 23, 2024. <https://rsf.org/en/country/georgia>

<sup>98</sup> Radio Liberty. 17.04.2024. *Special Forces Beat the Journalists of Publika, Tabula and Aprili*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32908208.html>

<sup>99</sup> InterpressNews. 07.05.2024. *IDFI Director and the Formula TV Crew Were Assaulted at the Swiss Embassy*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3RDOCKO>

<sup>100</sup> The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics 10.05.2024. *The Charter Condemns Intimidation and Violence Against Journalists*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3RBLHIS>

<sup>101</sup> The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. 15.05.2024. *Charter is Demanding an Effective Reaction on the Alleged Criminal Cases Against the Journalists of InterpressNews and Indigo*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3VBULLx>

<sup>102</sup> Transparency International Georgia. 25.12.2023. *Violence Against Georgian Media and the Government Reaction, 2023 Data*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/2023-statistics-violence-against-georgian-media-representatives-and-states-response>

Given the media's pivotal role in informing voters during the pre-election period, conducting fair and competitive elections hinges on having independent, unbiased, and critical media. Therefore, it is crucially important to ensure that journalists are able to fulfill their professional duties without hindrance and that cases of attacks on media organizations are promptly and appropriately addressed.

## 8. Social Media

Social media also plays a crucial role in informing citizens about political, including electoral processes. According to recent public opinion polls, 73% of Georgian citizens consider social media as one of the sources of receiving political news.<sup>103</sup> Facebook remains the most popular platform in Georgia, although TikTok's audience is growing rapidly. Despite the intentions of their creators, social media platforms often become sources for spreading disinformation, misleading messages, and propaganda.

Ahead of the elections, anti-Western narratives have gained strength. One notable indicator highlighting the challenge posed by disinformation is that combating it is the first of nine steps outlined by the EU for Georgia. The EU urges the Georgian Government to take action against disinformation that targets the EU and European values, including combating foreign information manipulation and interference. However, the Georgian Government has not taken substantial steps to address these concerns. Furthermore, representatives of the ruling party are actively involved in anti-Western campaigns.<sup>104</sup>

In the context of elections, Facebook advertisements continue to pose challenges. Despite the fact that the Meta Ad Library has been operating in Georgia since August 2020, the transparency standards it establishes for platform users are not consistently upheld. Specifically, many ads on the platform lack or only partially disclose accurate information about their creators. As a result, it can be difficult or impossible to determine the entities behind political advertisements. Such sponsored content often aims to discredit various targets, including political actors, journalists, activists, and civil society organizations.

Alongside domestic information manipulation, foreign interference also poses a significant threat to the elections being held on October 26, 2024. Coordinated inauthentic networks linked to Russia frequently utilize advertisements to dominate the information space. According to ISFED's investigation, these networks' pages publish undisclosed advertisements without mandatory registration, spreading anti-Western, particularly anti-EU messages, in violation of META rules.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, the origins and the amount of money spent on these advertisements remain unknown. Despite changes in the pages within the network, the tactics employed by the actors behind the network have remained consistent. Notably, following the reintroduction of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, Russian information

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<sup>103</sup> IRI. November 15, 2023. *Georgian Survey of Public Opinion | September – October 2023*. Accessed June 23, 2024. <https://www.iri.org/resources/georgian-survey-of-public-opinion-september-october-2023/>

<sup>104</sup> Neal, Will. May 24, 2024. *NATO Helped Georgia Counter Russian Trolls. Then the Strategy Backfired*. Accessed June 23, 2024. <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/nato-helped-georgia-counter-russian-trolls-then-the-strategy-backfired/>

<sup>105</sup> ISFED 2023. *Russian Information Operation in Georgia Against the EU*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.isfed.ge/eng/blogi/ganakhlebuli-rusuli-sainformatsio-operatsia-saqartveloshi-evrokavshiris-tsinaaghmdog->

operations have shifted their focus to supporting the ruling party, potentially influencing the upcoming parliamentary elections.<sup>106</sup>

In the context of elections, the disparity in spending on social media advertisements is concerning. According to the META Ads Library, the ruling Georgian Dream party spends more on Facebook ads than all the other political parties and their representatives combined.<sup>107</sup>

The involvement of public servants in the ruling party's support campaign continues to be a significant challenge. A portion of public servants participated in supporting the Transparency of Foreign Influence Law alongside central and local representatives of the ruling party. Across the country, administrative employees and public servants from local government bodies posted identical information cards on Facebook.<sup>108</sup> ISFED tracked and revealed that 96 public servants from 30 municipalities publicly shared the same information cards on their Facebook profiles from April 3-4.

Ahead of the parliamentary elections, social media has become significantly polarized. Certain actors, particularly anonymous networks affiliated with the ruling party, are utilizing popular social media platforms to spread propaganda and disseminate homophobic or sexist content, among other discrediting campaigns. Broadly speaking, social media has made it easier to disseminate information. As a result, social networks now pose a major challenge due to their role in spreading disinformation and manipulating public opinion and attitudes through coordinated information campaigns.

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<sup>106</sup> ISFED. 2024. *Russian Information Operaiton in Gerogia Support the Ruling Party and Targeting the EU*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/geo/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/rusuli-sainformatsio-operatsia-saqartveloshi-mmartveli-partiis-sasargeblod-da-evrokavshiris-tsinaaghmdeg>

<sup>107</sup> ISFED. 2024. *Political Advertisements on Meta Platforms in Georgia (October-December, 2023)*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/geo/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/politikuri-reklamebi-metas-platformebez-saqartveloshi-2023-tslis-oqtomberi-dekemberi->

<sup>108</sup> ISFED. 2024. *Coordinated Campaign in Support of the "Russian Law"*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/rusuli-kanonis-mkhardasacheri-koordinirebuli-kampania>

## 9. Use of Administrative Resources in the Ruling Party's Pre-Election Campaign

The blurred line between the Government and the ruling party, political influence on public servants, and extensive abuse of administrative resources during the pre-election period all represent ongoing challenges that Georgia has yet to address effectively. In July 2022, ISFED and Transparency International (TI) Georgia published a study<sup>109</sup> alleging the ruling party's misuse of administrative resources in the pre-election campaign based on leaked information from a former high-level authority figure in Georgia's Security Service. The study uncovered a significant scheme aimed at illegally mobilizing votes in favor of the ruling party, allegedly involving state institutions, including law enforcement. It appears that employees' personal information from budgetary institutions and other citizens was gathered to exert pressure and influence them in the future. Furthermore, citizens were reportedly offered benefits and relief through certain state institutions in exchange for electoral support. ISFED and TI Georgia shared this information with the Prosecutor General's Office, which initiated an investigation, whose outcomes have not been disclosed.

The same issues continue to persist ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections, given its significance. Although the official election campaign starts 60 days prior to election day, the ruling party has already begun to campaign unofficially by leveraging its resources and mobilizing state assets. Typically, this involves launching large-scale social projects and initiatives that appear to utilize administrative resources for electoral purposes.

### 9.1. Georgian Dream's Massive Rally

On April 29, the ruling party orchestrated a massive rally to endorse the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, emphasizing key messages from their electoral campaign. The ruling party extensively leveraged administrative resources to prepare for the event, underscoring a concerning overlap between state functions and partisan activities.

ISFED observed the preparation process across Georgia and identified widespread usage of administrative resources across all regions and municipalities. According to ISFED observers, the City Mayors' representatives, principals of public schools and kindergartens, as well as the heads of municipal non-commercial entities actively participated in mobilizing attendees for the rally. In some cases, they were assigned quotas for the number of people they needed to bring. Designated individuals were responsible for registering attendees and compiling lists of those present. Government employees had to take leave to attend the rally.

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<sup>109</sup> ISFED 2022. *State Resources at the Service of the Ruling Party: Proven Methods of Vote Buying and Illegal Mobilization of Voters in Georgia*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://isfed.ge/eng/angarishebi/sakhelmtsifo-resursebi-mmartveli-partiis-samsakhurshi-amomrchevlis-moskidvisa-da-ukanono-mobilizebis-aprobirebuli-metodebi-saqartveloshi>

A massive police presence was observed throughout the capital. Rustaveli Avenue and adjacent streets were cleared to accommodate vehicles brought in from the regions, with police instructing citizens to relocate their parked cars.

## 9.2. Allegedly Politically Motivated State Programs/Initiatives

As in previous election cycles, preparations for the 2024 elections and relevant pre-election campaigns began well before the official campaign period commenced.

ISFED's reports consistently highlight instances of improper use of administrative resources for electoral purposes. While ISFED recognizes the importance of delivering government services to citizens, state resources should not be exploited to gain electoral advantages. According to Paragraph 5.4 of the Copenhagen Declaration<sup>110</sup> of the OSCE, countries are urged to maintain a clear distinction between the state and political parties, ensuring that a political party does not wield the powers or resources of the state.

The Georgian Government's announcement of salary increases, additional funding, and various benefits extends across the entire public sector. However, it is noteworthy that a specific group of citizens was promised benefits significantly earlier, with the distribution coinciding with the pre-election campaign period, at the decision of the ruling party. Consequently, this initiative is viewed as a politically motivated maneuver intended to provide an advantage to the ruling party while placing other parties in a disadvantageous position.

In February 2024, the Georgian Government announced an increase in pensions for retired law enforcement officers, raising them from 560 GEL to 1000 GEL. Additionally, in the event of the breadwinner's death, the compensation provided to the family will increase to 1200 GEL. This initiative is supported by an allocation of 45 million GEL.<sup>111</sup>

Moreover, on June 3, 2024, the Prime Minister of Georgia announced that fines imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic would be waived for 2000 citizens, including 1855 individuals and 38 legal entities, amounting to a total of 5.6 million GEL.<sup>112</sup>

In April 2024, during a cabinet meeting of the Government of Georgia, the Minister of Finance announced the forgiveness of tax liabilities. This initiative pertains to tax liabilities incurred before 2021 by individuals and individual entrepreneurs, totaling 145,000 entities and amounting to 590 million GEL. These liabilities will be fully waived.<sup>113</sup>

In February 2024, the Georgian Government announced a reduction in loan interest rates for over 150,000 pensioners who had received loans at higher rates before 2023. These rates will be adjusted to match the

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<sup>110</sup> OSCE. Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE. p. 4. Accessed June 23, 2024. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/c/14304.pdf>

<sup>111</sup> InterpressNews. 26.02.2014. *Pensions of Retired Law Enforcements Will Increase from 560 to 1200 GEL, While in the Event of the Breadwinner's Death, the Compensation Provided to the Family will Increase to 1200 GEL*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3REVFDq>

<sup>112</sup> Publica. 03.06.2024. *Kobakhidze: Covid-19 Related Fines Imposed on Individuals will be Waived*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3XGEapX>

<sup>113</sup> InterpressNews. 08.04.2024. *Minister of Finance announced the forgiveness of tax debts of 145,000 entities and amounting to 590 million GEL*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3xFwDgd>

rates set in 2023.<sup>114</sup> The Government of Georgia and Liberty Bank jointly made this decision, which came into effect on March 15.<sup>115</sup>

On November 1, 2023, changes to Georgia's Law on Public Service mandated that internships at public institutions become paid positions.<sup>116</sup> Subsequently, on May 30, 2024, following an initiative by the Georgian Dream party and adopted by parliament, the number of interns at public institutions, typically determined by institutional leadership, increased from 10% to 20%. Furthermore, the Law on Public Service now extends some of its provisions to interns. Namely, the provisions regulating business trips for public servants. This initiative has successfully passed through all three readings in parliament.<sup>117</sup>

In February 2024, the Minister of Education, Science, and Youth announced a paid internship program for students. The program is set to commence in September and aims to employ 2,000 to 3,000 students. Participants will be placed in various ministries, their subordinate bodies, and legal entities of Public Law (LEPLs) across all municipalities.<sup>118</sup>

On April 10, 2024, the Mayor of Tbilisi announced the launch of a new phase of the "Learn and Get Employed" program. This initiative offers free professional development courses to residents of Tbilisi interested in enhancing their qualifications and securing employment opportunities.<sup>119</sup>

In November 2023, the Minister of Science and Education announced a salary increase initiative for teachers within the education sector. The Minister noted that the new salary policy, which was enacted on July 1, 2024, marks an unprecedented raise in teacher salaries. Specifically, under the updated formula, the average salary for full-time teaching positions will increase by at least 500 GEL, representing up to a 35% annual increase.<sup>120</sup> On June 19, the Minister issued an order specifying public school teachers' minimum remuneration amounts and conditions.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> InterpressNews. 22.02.2024. *Interest Rate on the Pension Loans Will Reduce for Over 150 000 Pensioners*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/788859-150-000-ze-met-pensioners-sesxis-procenti-sheumcirdeba>

<sup>115</sup> Liberty Bank. 14.03.2024. *Liberty Bank's Statement on the Reduction of Interest Rate on the Pension Loans*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3zq1Y72>

<sup>116</sup> Georgia's Law on the Amendment of the Georgia's Law of Public Service. <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5953198?publication=0>  
Georgia's Law on the Amendment of Remuneration in Public Institutions. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5953310?publication=0>

<sup>117</sup> The Parliament of Georgia 17.04.2024. *Draft Law on the Amendment of Remuneration in Public Institutions*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://info.parliament.ge/?fbclid=IwAR12l5G3YNKPhzWB-J9YM7oFASmnaU8Eiu1utQzdlzvbS7K2O1sFbdiCLYo#law-drafting/28434>

<sup>118</sup> Commersant. 26.02.2024. *2-3 Minister of Educaiton - 1000 Students will be Offered 4-Months Paid Internship from September*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.commersant.ge/news/society/2-3-atas-students-seqtembridan-anazghaurebadi-stazhirebis-4-tvian-programas-shevtavazebt-ganatlabis-ministri>

<sup>119</sup> Palitravideo.ge. 27.04.2024. *"A Lot of People are Looking for Jobs.. Starting from April 10 to May 1, Interested Individuals Will be Able to Register" - Information for Citizens Registered in Tbilisi*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3XuIDMe>

<sup>120</sup> Publica. 24.11.2023. *New Salary Formula for Teachers Will Enter into Effect from July 2024*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://publika.ge/maswavlebelta-akhali-sakhelfaso-formula-2024-wlis-ivlisidan-amogmeddeba-ministri/>

<sup>121</sup> The Order №108/N of the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth, issued on June 19, "on the minimum remuneration amounts and conditions for public school teachers". <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/6199654?publication=0&mibextid=xfxF2i>

In March, the Mayor of Tbilisi launched a call for applications for funding the spring semester tuition fee for students from socially vulnerable and multi-child families, as well as for students with disabilities.<sup>122</sup>

In March 2024, changes were announced to the cheap agrocredit program. According to the Minister of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, farmers cultivating annual plants could receive subsidized loans of up to 100,000 GEL, while large-scale producers of nuts could access subsidized loans of up to 300,000 GEL.<sup>123</sup>

According to the Rural Development Agency website, loans for cultivating annual plants can be accessed between April 1 and October 31, 2024.<sup>124</sup> For the production of nuts, loans are available from April 1 to July 31, 2024.<sup>125</sup>

During the same period, the Government announced a co-funding program for small-scale agricultural machinery hand-tractors (so-called moto blocs) for individuals who own agricultural land in mountainous settlements of Georgia. According to the Minister of Environmental Protection and Agriculture, the co-funding covers 70% of the total price. Additionally, the Minister announced a co-funding program for harvesting technology, with 10 million GEL allocated for this purpose. The maximum funding per beneficiary is capped at 150,000 GEL. This year, grape harvesting technology is also included, which is a new addition compared to previous years.<sup>126</sup>

Given the prevalence of alarming social conditions and housing issues in the country, the provision of dwellings has become a popular element of pre-election campaigning in Georgia. In January 2024, the Government of Georgia announced targeted programs aimed at multi-child homeless families or those living in dire conditions.<sup>127</sup> This program, scheduled to run until the end of 2025, aims to provide dwellings to 1,000 families currently living in severe conditions. The total budget for the program is 50,000,000 GEL. To qualify for the program, families must have three or more minors, all of whom are registered in the Social Services Agency's database of socially vulnerable individuals. Additionally, families must not be registered in the database of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and eco-migrants maintained by the Internally Displaced Persons, Eco-migrants and Livelihood Agency. Furthermore, if a homeless family

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<sup>122</sup> Guria News. 06.03.2024. *Whose Tuition Fee Will Fund the Tbilisi City Hall?* Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://gurianews.com/romel-studentebs-dauphinansebs-meria-gazaphkhulis-semestris-stsavlis-saphasurs/>

<sup>123</sup> InterpressNews. 27.03.2024. *The Government will Subsidize Loans up to 100,000 GEL for Farmers Cultivating Annual Plants, While Large Producers of Nuts will Receive Subsidies of up to 300,000 GEL.* Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/4c3SDjX>

<sup>124</sup> Rural Development Agency. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://rda.gov.ge/programs/095624-sheghavati-agi/agrokredit/7ffa530a-5415-4222-aa02-6a483f1bbd84>

<sup>125</sup> Rural Development Agency. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://rda.gov.ge/programs/095624-sheghavati-agi/agrokredit/5e986771-ff34-46a9-a53f-4b0bcbd16d3b>

<sup>126</sup> InterpressNews. 27.03.2024. *Government will Help Agricultural Land Owners Living in the Mountainous Settlements to Buy Small Sized Agricultural Machinery, so called Motoblocks - 70% Co-Funding Announced.* Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://bit.ly/3VEK5Zl>

<sup>127</sup> Ordinance of the Government of Georgia N1, issued on January 8, 2024 on the "Adoption of the State Program for Multi-Child Families Living in Homelessness or in Dire Conditions" <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/6065594?publication=0>



member has not yet received living space or relevant monetary compensation from the Government, they are also eligible to apply.<sup>128</sup>

In April 2024, the head of the Ajara Autonomous Republic of Georgia announced the provision of new dwellings in the "Dream City" located in Batumi. He pledged to allocate new apartments in the "Dream City" to 582 families. Many of these families are self-settled citizens, some of whom hold the status of eco-migrants, while many of them are socially vulnerable. These citizens have been requesting housing for years.<sup>129</sup> The distribution of apartments to eligible families commenced on June 5.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> InterpressNews. 08.01.2024. *Gov't to Provide Dwelling to 1000 Families in Harsh Living Conditions*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/783578-mzime-sacxovrebel-pirobebshi-mqop-1000-mde-ojaks-saxelmcipo-axal-sacxovrebel-partebbs-gadascems>

<sup>129</sup> InterpressNews.. 24.04.2024. *Tornike Rizhvadze - From the Next Month New Apartments in the Dream City will be Transferred to 582 Families*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/796644-tornike-rizhvaze-momdevno-tvidan-ocnebis-kalakshi-axalashenebuli-binebis-gadacema-daicqeba-sacxovreblit-582-ojaxi-dakmaqopildeba>

<sup>130</sup> Ajara TV. 05.06.2024. *So Called "Dream City" Apartments Transfer has Started*. Accessed on June 23, 2024. <https://ajaratv.ge/article/133879>