

Municipal Elections in Georgia - a Short Explainer



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Georgia is scheduled to hold nationwide municipal elections on October 4, 2025. These elections mark the first electoral test since the disputed 2024 parliamentary elections and come at a time of heightened political polarization, ongoing anti-government protests, and considerable democratic backsliding. The ruling Georgian Dream party has significantly altered the legal framework governing elections, as well as the right to assembly and free speech. These changes, made unilaterally and with limited consultation, have raised concerns over fairness, transparency, and political pluralism.

I. Introduction and Context

Georgia is scheduled to hold nationwide municipal elections on October 4, 2025. These elections mark the first electoral test since the [disputed](#) 2024 parliamentary elections and come at a time of heightened political polarization, [ongoing anti-government protests](#), and considerable [democratic backsliding](#). The ruling Georgian Dream party has significantly altered the legal framework governing elections, as well as the right to assembly and free speech. These changes, made unilaterally and with limited consultation, have raised concerns over fairness, transparency, and political pluralism.

Key legislative amendments related to the elections include an increase in the share of majoritarian seats in local councils (Sakrebulo), the elimination of the second-round requirement for majoritarian races, the increase of the electoral threshold for party-list candidates, and the repeal of gender quotas for candidate lists. These reforms are widely viewed as mechanisms to cement Georgian Dream's political dominance at the local level.

Like previous parliamentary elections, [electronic technologies](#) such as voter verification devices and electronic voting machines will be deployed in most polling stations across the country. However, questions around voter secrecy, data security, and equipment transparency remain largely unaddressed.

Since November 2024, the Georgian Dream appointed government has considerably intensified pressure on independent media, civil society, civic activists, and opposition political parties. Law-enforcement agencies violently dispersed largely peaceful rallies that have been ongoing since December 2024 until the present; however, no one from the police or other relevant units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs has been brought to justice. On the contrary, many civic activists have been arrested and jailed on what many believe are false or exaggerated charges. Likewise, many political leaders remain behind bars, while former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia is abroad.

Compounding these issues, Georgia's international relations are strained. The United States has [suspended its strategic cooperation](#) with Georgia, and the European Union [has halted the process](#) of Georgia's European accession. Many Georgian Dream officials, as well as de facto ruler and oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, remain sanctioned by Western countries. With Georgia increasingly isolated from its traditional Western partners, concerns over democratic backsliding and Georgia reversing its course towards Euro-Atlantic integration have intensified.

In past elections, malign actors have reportedly gathered and stored ID copies, to maintain registries of recruited voters, track payments, or monitor participation. The changes add a new layer of legal protection around voters' personal data making it harder for electoral interference networks to operate.

II. Legal Framework

The upcoming municipal elections will take place under a considerably revised legal framework, whereas most of the changes have been initiated and unilaterally adopted by Georgian Dream.

On October 4, 2025, citizens of Georgia will directly elect mayors and members of local councils (Sakrebulo) for a four-year term in 5 self-governing cities and 59 municipalities across the country. Elections to Sakrebulo will be administered under a mixed electoral system, whereas some seats in local councils are allocated through a proportional system and the rest through a first-past-the-post system.

In Spring 2024, the Georgian Dream party rushed [amendments](#) that eliminated a 40% threshold for majoritarian candidates and the need to hold a second round if none of the candidates garnered enough votes to clear the threshold. Through another set of [amendments](#) initiated and adopted by the contested parliament in December 2024, the share of majoritarian seats in Sakrebulo increased. In the 50-member Tbilisi Sakrebulo, 25 will be elected through the majoritarian system (compared to 10 previously). In self-governing cities, the number of councilors elected through a majoritarian system increased from 7 to 10, while the total number of seats decreased from 35 to 25. In the rest of the municipalities, based on the number of registered voters, up to 5 members will be elected through a majoritarian ticket, and 15 through proportional seats. The threshold for proportional elections has also increased from 2.5% to 4% in Tbilisi and 3% in other municipalities. An increase in the threshold, coupled with the increase in the share of majoritarian seats, may significantly shift the power dynamics within local governance in favor of the ruling party.

Mayoral races still require a candidate to secure more than 50 percent of the vote, with run-offs held between the two top-performing candidates on November 1, if no candidate receives the required number of votes.

The [repeal](#) of mandatory gender quotas further threatens to reverse gains in women's political participation. Previously, quotas ensured that women made up at least one-third of party candidate lists for municipal elections, contributing to a rise in the percentage of women elected. According to the [UNDP study](#), the share of women elected through the proportional ticket increased from 19.8% in 2017 to 31.4%, contributing to the overall increase of the total proportion of women in Sakrebulo to 24%. With the quotas removed, this progress may be undone. None of Georgian Dream's [25 majoritarian candidates](#) in Tbilisi is a woman.

These changes dismantle reforms that were previously agreed upon based on a broad political consensus under European Union [mediation](#) in 2021. Domestic observer organizations, such as the [International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy](#) (ISFD), and international institutions, including the [Venice Commission](#) and [OSCE/ODIHR](#), have criticized both the substance and the rushed, unilateral process of these legislative changes and characterized them as a tool of the Georgian Dream to further cement its power. Despite the criticism, the ruling party had not altered its decisions.

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Legislation regulating campaign finance remains largely the same, albeit not entirely: parties can collect membership fees, receive donations from Georgian citizens up to 60,000 GEL a year, and apply for a loan from a commercial bank. Donations by legal entities and foreign citizens are banned. The biggest change is that in spring 2025, the Georgian Dream parliament [banned](#) funding/in-kind contributions by foreign entities for events such as training, workshops, and lectures. Parties can qualify for the state funding if they receive at least 1% of the vote during the previous parliamentary elections. However, a set of amendments [adopted](#) in 2020 stripped parties boycotting parliament from state funding – as such, opposition political parties that cleared the threshold in the 2024 parliamentary elections are no longer eligible. Together, bans and restrictions on funding have reduced the capabilities of the opposition, solidifying Georgian Dream’s position.

Experts question the neutrality of the Anti-Corruption Bureau, charged with enforcing campaign finance regulations. In its [final report](#) on the October 26 Parliamentary Elections, ODIHR criticized the Bureau for its “selective and inconsistent application of legal provisions,” and with [the recent actions](#) of the Bureau against leading civil society watchdogs, [many civil society bodies view](#) the organization as a tool of political retribution in the hands of the Georgian Dream party.

III. Election Administration and New Voting Technologies

Municipal elections are administered by a three-tiered electoral administration consisting of the Central Election Commission (CEC), 73 District Election Commissions (DECs), and over 3000 regular precinct election commissions (PECs), in addition to special PECs established prior to election day in hospitals, prisons, and other locations defined by the law. Out-of-country voting is not allowed for the local elections.

Out of up to 17 members of the CEC, 8 non-partisan members are appointed by the parliament for a 5-year term, and the rest are nominated by parties represented in the Parliament. However, currently, from opposition parties, only Lelo and Gakharia For Georgia appointed members in the CEC. Previously, the Georgian Dream ruling party has considerably [revised](#) both the procedure and the thresholds required for the selection and appointment of the non-partisan members, effectively eliminating the participation of credible civil society organizations as well as the need for opposition support. This has further diminished the trust and credibility of the CEC and raised questions about its neutrality. Similar concerns apply to lower-level electoral bodies, such as District and Precinct Election Commissions, which suffer from [partisan appointments](#), limited training, and a lack of transparency.

The introduction of election technology during last year’s parliamentary elections, namely voter verification devices and electronic voting machines, which were intended to improve accuracy

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and efficiency, instead generated significant concerns. Ballot markers allegedly [revealed](#) vote choices due to ink leakage. Voter identification devices may have been used to [facilitate](#) multiple voting, particularly when manual data entry was allowed. Courts have largely [declined](#) to uphold complaints related to these violations. Despite these issues, around 75% of PECs will use voting technologies for municipal elections as well, covering 90% of the electorate. CEC will reuse the same equipment for the municipal elections, with only minor adjustments, such as installing a [plastic panel](#) to shield the secrecy of the ballot.

IV. Shrinking Civic Space and Legal Crackdowns

Since Spring 2024, the Georgian government has undertaken legislative and administrative actions that severely restrict the operational space for civil society and independent media. These include the passage of the [Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence](#) (dubbed the Russian Law), which requires organizations receiving foreign funding to register in a special register or face hefty fines, as well as the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which envisages individual [criminal liability](#) for failing to comply with registration requirements. To further suffocate cash-strapped CSOs, donors are now required to seek the [permission](#) of the Government of Georgia before disbursing grants. This requirement has already led to the [cancellation](#) of planned support for civic education and election monitoring.

Independent observer missions have been severely undermined. Domestic groups are underfunded and face legal threats, including charges of sabotage, with their accounts [seized](#). For the first time in 20 years, the premier election watchdog organization - ISFED - will not observe the local elections according to its "standard", comprehensive methodology. International organizations such as the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute - that have traditionally fielded international election observation missions - have ceased operations in Georgia following the shift in the US foreign assistance priorities. The Georgian Dream government did not extend an official invitation to observe elections to OSCE/ODIHR until [less than a month](#) ahead of elections, with ODIHR declining to field a mission at such a late stage, citing the impossibility of conducting a ["meaningful observation"](#).

No credible domestic or international observer missions have registered to observe the upcoming municipal elections. Already in spring 2025, civil society organizations feared that the new [CEC rules](#), barring observers from checking voter IDs or filming information displayed on ID verification devices and limiting media coverage to brief, distant recordings, would obstruct efforts to uncover election fraud, thus making election day observation obsolete.

In response to the mass demonstrations following the decision of the Georgian Dream Prime Minister to halt the EU accession process, the ruling party intensified its crackdown on activists and protesters from diverse social groups: 300 people were subject to police violence and detentions in late 2024.

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The Public Defender reported injuries consistent with [punitive violence](#), yet no officials have been held accountable despite human rights groups' [calls](#). Many detainees faced politically [motivated charges](#), according to civil society organizations, with more than 30 receiving [jail terms](#). Alongside the violence, the government rushed through [restrictive laws](#) increasing fines and penalties, and severely curtailing the freedom of assembly, which the Venice Commission deemed [disproportionate](#).

V. Political and Media Landscape

The political campaign environment is severely constrained. Legislative [efforts](#) are underway to ban opposition parties, using charges of treason or alleged historical wrongdoing. Several major opposition leaders, including three leaders from Akhali Party, are [behind bars](#) on charges of not appearing before a parliamentary committee set up to investigate crimes committed under the previous ruling party. Another leader of the Akhali Party is in pre-trial detention for [damaging](#) a poster of the Georgian Dream mayoral candidate. The State Security Service [detained](#) the former Chair of the UNM for publicly offering a prize to law-enforcers who would not obey illegal orders of the government. Two leaders of Lelo briefly served a prison sentence prior to being [pardoned](#) by the Georgian Dream-elect president Mikheil Kavelashvili. Former Prime Minister Gakharia is abroad in Germany. From the mainstream opposition, only the Lelo and Gakharia For Georgia parties are running in the municipal elections. However, they only [fielded](#) mayoral candidates in 36 out of 64 municipalities.

Media freedom is also under threat. The [shutdown](#) of Mtavari TV due to financial and internal conflicts highlights the vulnerability of independent media. Amendments to the Law on Broadcasting further constrain the media. Broadcasters are now prohibited from receiving foreign funding, and the National Communications Commission has expanded its authority to [penalize](#) media outlets for content critical of the government.

Social media — particularly Facebook — has become the primary source of news for many Georgians. This has increased the population's exposure to disinformation campaigns, including coordinated operations by [Russian](#) actors. Georgian Dream and affiliated groups have spent [heavily](#) on Facebook advertising to shape public narratives. Television remains a secondary source of information, but the landscape is highly polarized. Government-aligned stations avoid airing opposition voices, while Georgian Dream boycotts opposition-leaning channels, limiting public access to diverse political perspectives.

Journalists face increasing harassment and violence. Almost 150 were [injured](#) while covering the protest rallies in December 2024. Mzia Amaglobeli, founder of Batumelebi and Netgazeti, has been sentenced to a two-year prison term for slapping a police officer during a protest, drawing harsh criticism from both [domestic](#) and [international](#) human rights organizations.

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VI. Conclusion

With less than two weeks left before election day, Georgia's October 4 municipal elections are taking place amid deepening polarization and shrinking civic space. The ruling Georgian Dream party has reshaped the legal framework in its favor - expanding majoritarian seats, raising thresholds, and repealing gender quotas - while sidelining opposition voices and undermining independent oversight. Election administration and new voting technologies remain clouded by mistrust; civil society groups face unprecedented restrictions, and international observers largely stay away. At the same time, independent media is facing existential threats, opposition leaders are jailed or abroad, and the broader political environment is marked by fear, disinformation, and repression. Given that Georgian Dream is running largely uncontested in most municipalities, the elections are unlikely to meaningfully alter the balance of power, instead serving more as a formality that underscores the erosion of political competition and pluralism.

About the author:



Tamara Sartania – an independent international consultant, specializing in democratic elections, civil society development, parliamentary and political party strengthening, and women's political participation. Her work assignments included working as an Election Adviser for OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), where her portfolio included coordinating needs assessment missions and ODIHR's electoral activities in nine OSCE participating states. In addition, she served as a core team member for several ODIHR election observation missions. As a Deputy Chief of Party for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) Georgia office, Tamara supervised initiatives to support political pluralism in Georgia through capacity building on national and regional levels. She has also worked as a thematic analyst for NDI's election observation missions to Ethiopia, Ukraine, and Lebanon. Tamara holds a Master of Arts Degree in Law and Diplomacy from The Fletcher School, Tufts University, and a Postgraduate Certificate in Strategic Communications (with Distinction) from King's College London.

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