

Georgia's elections marred by an uneven playing field, pressure and tension, but voters were offered a wide choice: international observers

TBILISI, 27 October 2024 –While voters were offered a choice between 18 candidate lists and candidates could generally campaign freely, Georgia's parliamentary elections were marred by entrenched polarization and concerns over recently adopted legislation and its impact on fundamental freedoms and civil society, as well as highly divisive campaign rhetoric and widespread reports of pressure on voters, international observers said in a [statement](#) today.

The joint observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA), and the European Parliament (EP) noted deepening political divisions, as well as a significant imbalance in financial resources and the many advantages taken by the ruling party contributed to an already uneven playing field. In the run-up to the elections, numerous civil society organisations reported on the stigmatizing impact of the 'law on transparency of foreign influence', together with incidents of attacks and intimidation. This, along with potential sanctions for not complying with the law, has also impacted their ability to carry out their work free from undue pressure.

"Imbalances in financial resources, a divisive campaign atmosphere, and recent legislative amendments were of significant concern throughout this election process," said Pascal Allizard, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the OSCE short-term observer mission. "Yet the engagement shown on election day—from the active voter participation, robust presence of citizen and party observers, and rich diversity of voices—gives the sign of a system that is still growing and evolving, with a democratic vitality under construction."

Observers found the legal framework to be adequate for holding democratic elections. However, some previous positive changes were reversed by recent amendments, and several longstanding recommendations remain unaddressed. While the earlier amendments were adopted following inclusive public discussions, frequent revisions, including a number made shortly before the elections and without broad cross-party support, undermined its stability, and raised concerns about the potential for misusing the changes to gain political benefit. At the same time, the effectiveness of campaign finance oversight was undermined by limited enforcement and concerns over the impartiality and political instrumentalization of the oversight body.

"These elections were marked by high polarisation of the political and media landscape, hate speech against the opposition and the civil society and antagonism towards the office of the President," said Iulian Bulai, Head of the PACE delegation. "The quality of the elections reflected the pre-electoral period. Given the cases of vote-buying, widespread climate of pressure and party-organised intimidation before and during the elections, especially in rural areas, questions about the impartiality of state institutions, we express our concerns about the electoral conditions, in particular the uneven playing field which undermines trust in the outcome and explains the reactions to the election results. These issues need to be addressed by the authorities."

Despite a constitutional obligation to ensure gender equality, legal changes made this year have undermined this aim and led to a significant decline in the number of women on party lists for these elections. Party programmes lacked messages specifically targeting women and featured few women in their campaigns. At the same time, women politicians in Georgia continue to face deeply rooted stereotypes and even violence.

"While we commend the largely peaceful election, the decline in female candidates due to the removal of gender quotas is a setback for diversity, especially as women's active participation at polling stations highlights their vital role and demand for greater representation," said Pia Kauma, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. "With the recent adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, I hope its

implications for freedom of association and expression will be re-evaluated in the next parliament to protect civil society's vital work in Georgia and ensure all voices are heard.”

The election administration organized the elections efficiently, but the public perception of its impartiality was harmed by concerns about recent changes over its nomination and decision-making processes, as well as perceived links between members without formal political affiliation and the ruling party. For the first time, electronic devices were used in most polling stations, and the election administration made a significant effort to educate voters on their use ahead of election day. Election day was generally well organized procedurally and orderly, but it was marked by a tense environment. The secrecy of the vote was frequently compromised and there were reports of intimidation and pressure on voters.

“Respect for the shared values of individual liberty, democracy and the rule of law is an essential condition for becoming a NATO member. This election was yet another critical test for Georgia’s democracy, and its aftermath will be another,” said Faik Öztrak, Head of the NATO PA delegation. “It is now my duty to report back on these elections – from election administration to intimidation and pressure on voters – so that the Assembly can explore how to best support the Georgian people, who have demonstrated again and again that they want a democratic Georgia in the EU and NATO.”

The campaign was competitive although subdued, but the language and imagery used were highly divisive. During the campaign, ruling party representatives made public statements about their intention to ban key opposition parties after the elections. Observers also noted reports of intimidation, coercion and pressure on voters, particularly on public sector employees and other groups, raising concerns about the ability of some voters to cast their vote without fear of retribution.

“We continue to express deep concerns about the democratic backsliding in Georgia. The conduct of yesterday’s election is unfortunately evidence to that effect,” said Antonio López-Istúriz White, Head of the EP delegation. “We will continue to closely follow the situation in Georgia to see if the next government chooses to realign with EU values and norms and reverse the negative tendencies of the last months.”

Georgia’s media scene is diverse but highly polarized, and depends on financing by political actors. Media monitoring carried out by the observation mission showed clear political bias across all outlets, while legal obligations for impartial news coverage on commercial television were ignored. Although the public broadcaster’s coverage of candidates was mostly positive or neutral in tone, it devoted significantly more time to the ruling party than to other parties. In addition, the safety of journalists remains a major concern following a series of recent assaults, intimidation and pressure.

“While the campaign offered voters a wide choice in the run-up to Georgia’s parliamentary elections, which was good to see that is not enough to bring an election in line with international democratic principles,” said Eoghan Murphy, who headed the ODIHR election observation mission. “The deep polarisation in the country, the undue pressure on voters and civil society, and the tension that we saw on election day demonstrate that much work is still needed.”

The international election observation mission to the parliamentary elections in Georgia totalled 529 observers from 42 countries, composed of 380 ODIHR-deployed experts, long-term, and short-term observers, 60 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA, 39 from PACE, 38 from the NATO PA, and 12 from the EP.

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