

By NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

## US Embassy, EU Delegation assess municipal elections in Georgia

The EU and US embassies assessed the October 2 municipal elections in Georgia, emphasizing that the process was generally well administered, but was characterized by 'hardened polarisation.' They agreed with the initial findings of the OSCE/ODIHR and said that the participants were able to campaign freely in a competitive environment, and that the election day proceeded in an orderly and transparent manner.

In particular, US Embassy agreed with the assessment that these elections were technically well-administered, but that 'the environment was marred by widespread and consistent allegations of intimidation, vote-buying, pressure against candidates and voters, pervasive misuse of citizen observers as party representatives, and an uneven playing field, including in the pre-election period.' While voters were able to cast their votes in a largely calm environment on October 2, the election process is about more than Election Day.

In a strongly worded statement about Georgia's October 2 local elections, the U.S. Embassy shared ODIHR's concerns about 'the polarized media landscape, the significant imbalance of resources and insufficient oversight of campaign finances, the under-representation of women in the campaign, reports of misuse of administrative resources, and pressure against journalists.'

The U.S. Embassy highlighted that 'the continued blurring of the line between state and party resources is deeply disturbing.' "Significant reports about the misuse of administrative resources during the campaign raised doubts about the overall fairness of the elections," it stressed.

Statement reads that in many towns and villages, pressure against teachers,



"The current polarisation continues to have a negative effect on Georgia's democracy – all parties have a responsibility to address this."

law enforcement officers, and other public sector workers reportedly interfered with their ability to exercise their free choice on Election Day, adding that 'this type of abuse has occurred too often in Georgian elections and is wholly incompatible with Georgia's democratic and Euro-Atlantic ideals.'

"There is a dangerous risk that these and other recurring election violations are becoming accepted as inevitable. Geor-

gian voters deserve a higher standard of integrity in their election process," the U.S. Embassy said.

In its statement on the EU Delegation to Georgia, along with Member States' Embassies seconded preliminary findings of international observers and highlighted the same shortcomings as the US Embassy. The EU Embassy additionally noted that underrepresentation of women in the campaign demonstrates a need for

greater commitment to ensure adequate representation in politics.

Both embassies praised legal, electoral changes adopted before the elections which 'substantially improved the legal framework,' and called on the Georgian parliament and parties to take steps for the full implementation of OSCE/ODIHR previous recommendations, 'including those related to limitations on voting rights, some aspects of electoral dispute resolution, and further measures to counter the misuse of state resources.'

US Embassy called on Parliament, including opposition parties, to recommit in good faith to comprehensively strengthening Georgia's election system; to implement key reforms – including judicial reforms – recommended by ODIHR, the Venice Commission, and Georgia's international partners; and to pass constitutional amendments ensuring that all future parliamentary elections will be fully proportional, as they have previously pledged to do.

The US Embassy assessed that high voter turnout despite the COVID-19 pandemic was indicative of the continued commitment of the people of Georgia to democracy and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path.

"Municipal elections matter because the local level is where citizens' needs and interests are met most directly by their elected representatives. Georgia's citizens have frequently expressed their desire for a greater voice in decisions that affect their lives. The lack of focus on local issues in yesterday's elections was a missed opportunity to make progress towards achieving that goal," the US Embassy wrote.

In the statement, the U.S. Embassy also commended the work of professional domestic election observation organizations, in



OSCE/ODIHR says that contestants were able 'to campaign freely in a competitive environment' that was, however, "marred by wide-spread and consistent allegations of intimidation, vote-buying, pressure on candidates and voters, and an unlevel playing field."



# 2021 Local Election About To Change the Political Climate in Georgia

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

The situation became extremely tense before the October 2 local self-government elections. No matter how the second round ends, protests are inevitable.

If the Georgian Dream fails to get 43% of the vote, it will be asked to call early elections, and if the Georgian Dream announces that it has won more than 43% of the vote, then the reason for the protests will be the rigging of the elections.

Both the government and the

opposition say they will definitely win. The country is on the brink of civil strife.

Usually, in democratic countries, public opinion polls are used to predict the outcome of future elections. However, there are no public opinion polls in Georgia that all political forces consider credible. The government calls the "pre-election propaganda" those pre-election ratings, according to which the Georgian Dream will not be able to collect 43% in the October 2 elections, and appeals to the polls

commissioned by it, according to which the Georgian Dream will convincingly win.

The opposition is sure that the Georgian Dream rigged the elections and uses the already tried and tested methods used by Ivanishvili's team.

The pre-election period was marked by the publication of numerous compromising materials for the government. One of the latest reports from Main Channel was that they had seized on a pre-election strategy prepared by Israeli political technologist Moshe Klughaft for the

ruling party.

The document published by the Main Channel envisages discrediting the opposition and the independent media, inciting hatred in the society.

Klughaft is considered to be the mastermind of planning an election campaign based on negative and discrediting technologies, and the Georgian Dream has used his services before, but this time the Georgian Dream has denied any connection to Klughaft and has accused the Main Channel of spreading misinformation.

However, the opposition is sure that the Georgian Dream acts according to this strategy and fulfills the points established there, for example, to the former Prime Minister Gakharia.

Gakharia has become a serious problem for the Georgian Dream, whose party, judging by the current ratings, has become the third political force after the Georgian Dream and the National Movement.

The 2021 local elections gained special significance because of the famous document of Charles Michel. Western friends are trying to get the parties to agree to recognize the results if OSCE observers consider the election results fair.

## Politics

# Ex-president Saakashvili Will Leave Georgia Only After Serving Sentence, Says PM Garibashvili.



Saakashvili was convicted and sentenced to six years in prison in absentia back in 2018 for abuse of authority.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

The United National Movement (UNM) party members and their supporters gathered near the 12th penitentiary in Rustavi yesterday to support the third president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, who is currently arrested. According to the opposition MP, Tako Charkviani, emigrants also gathered to show support to the former president.

Nika Melia, chairman of the National Movement addressed the rally members by saying that while Saakashvili is in prison, he would be at the front line of the fight against Bidzina

Ivanishvili. "No matter how hard they [Georgian Dream] try, they can never spark tension between me and him!" stressed Melia in response to PM Irakli Garibashvili's statement, who claimed that Melia dislikes Saakashvili and 'is glad' the ex-president is in prison.

Saakashvili, who is a citizen of Ukraine, was detained in Tbilisi on October 1, ahead of Saturday's municipal elections.

He claims that he returned to Georgia "to help Georgian people restore government and democracy." Georgia's Chief Prosecutor's Office has charged father and son who transported him to Georgia's western region of Samegrelo after illegally crossing into Georgia several days ago. A person who owned a flat where the ex-president was hiding before being detained has also been charged. The former president has started a hunger strike, claiming he will not stop until

he and the people arrested because of him are not released.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced yesterday that he would do anything in his power to bring Saakashvili back to Ukraine.

"As President of Ukraine, I am constantly engaged in bringing back Ukrainian citizens through various means that I have within my power. Mikheil Saakashvili is a citizen of Ukraine, so this applies to him as well," stated Zelensky at the briefing.

According to Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani, the Ukrainian government has the right and duty to care for its citizens, however, before Saakashvili became a Ukrainian citizen "he was the president and a citizen of Georgia and has been charged following Georgian legislation."

Foreign Minister also stated that the ex-president 'possibly' violated the Ukrainian legislation by crossing its border illegally. Ukrainian edition Censor.NET reported yesterday that according to the Director of the Executive Committee of the National Council for Reforms in Odesa, an official inquiry has been launched into Saakashvili's departure from Ukraine.

The Group of European Conservatives and Reformers has stated Saakashvili's detention, stating that "he was fully entitled to return to his homeland." The ECR Group remarks that the allegations against him made by the ruling party are unfounded and calls upon the Georgian authorities to drop the



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charges and release him from custody immediately.

The statement praises Saakashvili's achievements as well as his 'pro-European and pro-Transatlantic stances' which, according to the ECR group, lead to putting Georgia on the democratic path.

"We strongly believe that political revanchism is not a path that should be pursued by the authorities," reads the statement.

According to the Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy of the EU, Nabila Massrali, the EU calls on the government of Georgia as well as opposition parties to exercise restraint and respect the rule of law. According to her, an inclusive parliamentary process, political stability, and a judicial system that is trusted by Geor-

gian citizens is a precondition for Georgia to deepen its partnership with the EU per the Association Agreement. "All parties must engage in de-escalation efforts," Massrali states.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has noted that they would not accept requests from anyone in the world to release Saakashvili and stressed that he will be able to leave the country only after he serves his prison term.

Saakashvili faces several criminal charges in Georgia such as violent dispersal of anti-government mass protests on November 7, 2007, unlawful raiding of Imedi television company by riot police, exceeding official powers by using violence, and appropriation or embezzlement of budget money in large quantities.

## Weather

Tuesday, October 5

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 13°C

Night Rain

Low: 10°C

Wednesday, October 6

Day Rain

High: 12°C

Night Light Rain

Low: 10°C

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# Protecting 24,000 people from floods

With US\$4.5 million from the Green Climate Fund and the Government of Sweden, UNDP and the Roads Department of Georgia are launching flood protection works in four municipalities



Photos: Vladimir Valishvili/UNDP

**T**BILISI. 4 October 2021 – Four Georgian municipalities will benefit from a flood protection initiative that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is implementing in close part-

nership with the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure.

On 30 September, UNDP Head **Nick Beresford** and Chairperson of the Ministry's Roads Department **Giorgi**

**Tsereteli** signed a US\$4.5 million agreement to implement flood protection measures in the Abasha, Kobuleti, Lagodekhi and Senaki municipalities for the Tskhenistkali, Achkva, Lagodekhishevi and Tsivi rivers.

By cleaning riverbeds, reinforcing riverbanks, constructing flood barriers and building other crucial infrastructure, UNDP and the Roads Department will provide direct protection to 24,000 people.

Similar measures will ultimately expand to six more municipalities that also face a particularly high risk of flooding (Akhmeta, Gori, Khobi, Samtredia, Signaghi and Telavi).

“To break cycles of climate-induced disasters, we must protect people’s lives and property from the most severe consequences of climate change and work together to find greener and more sustainable development solutions,” Beresford said.

“Over 60 percent of Georgia’s population lives in disaster-risk regions. Their safety is one of the government’s top pri-

orities,” Tsereteli said. “We are establishing a modern protection system to prevent extreme weather events from turning into devastating disasters.”

Floods and other climate-induced disasters have cost Georgia more than \$1.2 billion in economic losses over the past two decades. Extreme flood events alone have cost the country around \$190 million per year. Total economic losses could increase to \$1.2 billion per year over the next decade if the country does not replace its reactive approach (compensation and reconstruction after each successive disaster) with preventative measures.

As part of a \$74 million nationwide effort funded by the Green Climate Fund and the governments of Georgia, Sweden and Switzerland, UNDP is assisting Georgia to develop a national system of climate adaptation and disaster prevention measures. The seven-year programme will reduce the risk of climate-induced disasters in 11 Georgian river basins and cut economic losses by up to 90 percent.



## Vote on 2 October was a missed opportunity for local democracy in Georgia, says Head of Congress delegation

**S**trasbourg, 4 October 2021 - The Congress concluded its mission to observe the local elections held on 2 October in Georgia. David ERAY (Switzerland, EPP/CCE, R), Head of the delegation, underlined the extremely polarized political environment in the country as well as an increase in verbal aggression, hate speech and fake news on social media during the campaign. “This polarisation had a paralyzing effect on local democracy which, in fact, has been taken hostage of the overall national political situation. Against this background, this poll was a missed opportunity for local democracy in Georgia”, Mr Eray stated. The overall unlevel playing field, pressure on voters and vote-buying were further features of these elections which raised concern of the Congress delegation.

Further to the invitation by the Georgian authorities, the Congress carried out an election observation mission from 29 September to 3 October 2021 and observed the local elections held on 2 October as part of a joint international election observation mission together with the OSCE/ODIHR and the European Parliament. The Congress mission comprised 18 members representing 15 Council of Europe countries who observed elections in 9 regions of Georgia, visiting in total some 120 polling stations from the opening until the closing.

The Election Day was overall calm, orderly, transparent and well organised. Except for some inconsistencies, particularly regarding the set-up of polling booths and finger-inking, the Congress observers did not notice major

shortcomings during the voting procedures. Some polling stations in urban areas, mostly in Tbilisi, were comparatively small considering the large number of commission members and domestic observers and thus over-crowded. This led also to some confusion about the different roles of election workers, notably during the counting. Some of the Congress observers also reported violations of the new regulation on the 100-meter-perimeter around polling stations.

Although new regulations were put in place to increase number of women on candidate lists by placing at least one in every three candidates of the opposite gender on the ballot, this legal provision proved insufficient as women were almost always placed as the third, sixth or ninth candidate, thus having much lower chances to get elected than their male counterparts. “In our opinion, this was against the spirit of the law”, Mr Eray stated.

Prior to the Election Day, the Congress delegation held meetings in Tbilisi with various interlocutors, including representatives of the diplomatic corps, domestic and international NGOs, media representatives, the Central Elections Commission and with the Deputy Minister of Justice and Head of Inter-Agency Task Force for Free and Fair Elections, Mr Tornike Cheishvili. Meetings with representatives from different parties including GD, UNM, For Georgia and European Georgia rounded off the preparatory programme of the Congress. The Congress report will be presented at the next Monitoring Committee and adopted during the 42nd Congress Plenary in March 2022.

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particular ISFED, GYLA, PMMG and TI, saying that these CSOs informed the public with sound and balanced assessments throughout the campaign period. The Embassy also expressed concerns about the reports that some of these respected NGOs reported barriers to observing the elections.

Given the second round of elections, the EU called on the authorities and all the political parties to urgently make additional efforts to ensure a fair electoral process. “The reported malpractices must not become a norm. We also expect credible and swift investigations of all complaints, including reported intimidation and violence against journalists.”

Speaking of the second round of elections, scheduled for October 30, the statement called on the Georgian authorities and all the political parties ‘to urgently make additional efforts to ensure a fair electoral process.’

“The EU will remain a consistent supporter of efforts to strengthen democracy in Georgia. We will continue to base our relationship on the principles of respect for human rights, the rule of law and democratic standards – values that are at the core of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement.”

The UK diplomatic mission also supported OSCE/ODIHR assessment, saying that issues of concern need to be addressed. The embassy hopes that for the second round of elections, all political parties will campaign according to best practices.

According to the preliminary data of the October 2 self-government elections, the ruling party Georgian Dream has the largest number of votes in the proportional part of Georgia, more than 46%. In second place is the National Movement with over 30% and in third place is Gakharia-for Georgia, which has more than 7% of the vote. Members of various municipalities, including Tbilisi Sakrebulo, will have Lelo, Girchi-more Freedom and Ana Dolidze-for the People.

The threshold for electing Sakrebulo members in the proportional system is 3% in all municipalities except Tbilisi. In Tbilisi - 2.5%

In addition, the second round of mayoral elections will be held in all 5 self-governing cities - Tbilisi, Rustavi, Kutaisi, Poti and Batumi with the participation of candidates nominated by the Georgian Dream and the National Movement. On October 2, voter turnout was 51.92%.