

Georgian Presidential Elections 2018: The show must go on

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Executive summary

Due to recent constitutional changes, the 2018 election is the last direct presidential election in Georgia. However, despite limited formal competences, the next president's political affiliation matters. Even the incumbent president, despite his membership in the governing party, clashed with the government. The first round produced a virtual draw between the government-backed independent Salome Zurbishvili (38.64 per cent) and the main opposition's candidate Grigol Vashadze (37.78 per cent). Thus, a historically unprecedented second round will be held on 28 November without a clear favourite.

The campaign consisted almost exclusively of personal attacks. The main means to discrediting a political opponent remains the accusation of pro-Russian sentiments or being controlled by Russia. Due to Zurbishvili's poor performance, the ruling party has begun to frame the second round as a political choice between them and the opposition. This makes the election a 'referendum' about the increasingly unpopular governing Georgian Dream party of the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. However, his dominant role in politics has resulted in 'Ivanishvili-fatigue' and a dropping allure of his party. This enabled Vashadze to secure a surprisingly good result, particularly in larger cities.

Georgians now have to choose between Ivanishvili's candidate, who accused her own country of starting the 2008 war with Russia, and Saakashvili's old comrade, who flaunts his Soviet diplomatic career. This makes both unacceptable to many. Many Georgians now ask themselves, "Which is the lesser evil?"

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Introduction

On 28 October 2018, Georgians went to the polls to elect their fifth president. Amidst widely varying partisan polling it was ultimately no surprise that there will be a runoff between the candidate backed by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party and the candidate of the United National Movement (UNM), torn but still the largest opposition force made up of followers of the former president Mikheil Saakashvili. Formally independent but GD-endorsed Salome Zurbishvili and UNM's Grigol Vashadze will contest the second round on 28 November.

The narrow outcome of the first round showed that neither candidate can be confident of victory. Zurbishvili came first with 38.64 per cent while Vashadze was close behind with 37.74 per cent. A distant third with 10.97 per cent was David Bakradze of the UNM-breakaway party European Georgia, followed by several other candidates in the low single digits.²

Zurbishvili, besides having the endorsement and the financial and administrative backing of the ruling party, could also count on the broader anti-UNM (i.e. anti-Saakashvili) vote but committed several serious gaffes. The most controversial was her statement about Georgia starting the 2008 war with Russia and bombing its own population in South Ossetia. The move was considered close to political suicide and caused a public outcry.³ On the other hand, Grigol Vashadze is a former Soviet diplomat who is closely associated with the Saakashvili administration in which he served as foreign minister from 2008 until 2012.

The presidency has become a rather symbolic position after constitutional changes following Saakashvili's highly contentious tenure. Nevertheless, this election serves as an important test of support for the ruling GD while offering the UNM an opportunity for a national comeback by breaking the GD monopoly on power. As such, these elections are already historical as this is the first time the Georgian presidential elections went into a second round.

Round one: gaffes, sleaze and poor polling

In accordance with the constitutional changes adopted in March 2018, the president will be elected, from 2023 onwards, by an electoral college and no longer by popular vote.⁴ This will have two main consequences. Although the transformation from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system will further diminish the power of the head of state, the office will maintain one important competence: the presidential pardon. This is highly significant to the case of the fugitive former president Mikheil Saakashvili. He has been convicted of abuse of

² Election Administration of Georgia (2018): Presidential Elections 2018, Preliminary results. Available: <http://results.cec.gov.ge/eng/>

³ Kadagidze, T (2018): „Salome Zourabichvili – the ruling party's first serious failure”, *JAMnews*, 2018.10.28. Available: <https://jam-news.net/who-is-georgian-presidential-candidate-salome-zurabichvili-and-why-isnt-the-public-wild-about-her/>

⁴ *Civil Georgia* (2018): „Constitutional Changes Passed on Final Reading”, 24 March 2018. Available: <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30976&fbclid=IwAR0XYSJCPKmJV2blRfaegbofr-EZ42a4xHLbNCmtZTNKEF6GGR4IWW8FRks>

Constitution of Georgia, *The Legislative Herald of Georgia*. 23 March 2018, Available: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=35>

power in connection with the assault on opposition MP Valeri Gelashvili and the murder of banker Sandro Girgyliani. As a result, he has been sentenced to a combined prison sentence.⁵ The potential pardon would cause significant upheaval, even though currently he denies to even consider appealing for it.⁶

Despite limited formal competences, it would be premature to underestimate the role of the president since the office holder's political affiliation may lead to tensions with the government and parliamentary majority. This is not without precedent, as the country witnessed a multitude of conflicts between the current president, Giorgi Margvelashvili, and the ruling GD coalition, despite his election with GD support in 2013.

So far, the campaign has been almost exclusively negative and consisted of a series of mutual accusations between both main camps that intended to discredit the opponent. Instead of addressing any of the pressing issues for Georgian voters, like improving economic conditions or the delivery of public services, the main topic so far have been mutual accusations about the respective opponent's alleged pro-Russian attitudes and about which branch of the Russian secret services is allegedly controlling them.⁷ Besides obviously being the dominant topic of Georgian foreign and security policy, the never-ending Moscow blame game has become a compulsory show element of political campaigning. This ongoing political roller-coaster of extremes and personal power plays under the guise of democratic consolidation may soon lead to a growing demand by Georgian citizens for a fundamental change in the political arena.⁸

The campaign also highlighted the failure of most opinion polls in the run-up to the election day, which were unable to even remotely predict the results. Opinion polls were differing widely, usually favouring the candidate for the commissioning party. Problems were caused by the politicization of the polling organisations, incorrect or incomplete census data and methodological shortcomings.⁹ Nevertheless, two out of three exit polls correctly predicted a dead heat and the necessity for a second round.¹⁰

What should be noted about the electoral geography of these elections is the city-village divide. Almost all larger cities (Kutaisi, Rustavi, Poti, Batumi) voted for Vashadze, as well as Telavi,

⁵ Guthrie, S (2018): „Tbilisi City Court Sentences Saakashvili to 6 Years in Gelashvili Case”. *Georgia Today*, 29 June 2018. Available: <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/11005/Tbilisi-City-Court-Sentences-Saakashvili-to-6-Years-in-Gelashvili-Case>

⁶ *Civil Georgia* (2018): „Saakashvili: I Won't Seek Pardoning from Vashadze”. 30 October 2018. Available: <https://civil.ge/archives/262793>

⁷ Sikharulidze, A (2018): „Предвыборная кампания в Грузии”. *Russian International Affairs Council*, 25 October 2018. Available: http://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/posts/soviet/predvybornaya-kampaniya-v-gruzii/?fbclid=IwAR3j_GNwALxLge1scAaeWzdGtG0QLMGtmJ2HpT9DLss8JAF0n_qNDuqJWj0;

⁸ Hett, F (2018): „Бесславная страница истории политической культуры.” *International Politics and Society*. Available: <https://www.ipg-journal.io/intervju/statja/show/besslavnaja-stranica-istorii-politicheskoi-kultury-652/>

⁹ *Kavkaz-uzel* (2018): „Были ли выборы президента Грузии честными? Статистический обзор результатов”. 31 October 2018. Available: https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/blogs/83781/posts/35147?fbclid=IwAR1_ZD5v5wzcSLQP_Txm3LBzg1cvBR-J2HiuVOKN3vKfxyL0rsTdQBctOCc

¹⁰ *Civil Georgia* (2018): „Exit Polls Differ Wildly, as Voting Ends”. 28 October 2018. Available: <https://civil.ge/archives/261944>

Mtskheta, Gori, and Zugdidi by considerable margins (5-22 per cent).¹¹ The ten districts of the capital, Tbilisi, were divided evenly between the two candidates. The more central and prestigious districts (Mtatsminda, Vake, Saburtalo etc.) voted for Zurabishvili by a margin of 6-7 per cent, while the ‘outskirts’ (Samgori, Krtanisi, Gladi etc.) supported Vashadze.¹² Vashadze’s victory in places like Batumi could indicate that anti-UNM sentiments, which had been strong in the second largest city in past years, might no longer suffice to deliver votes for GD.¹³

Before Round two: What is the impact of Ivanishvili-fatigue?

With such poor polling, it was hard to foresee how much harm Zurabishvili caused by her statements on the 2008 war. The choice of Zurabishvili by the GD leader and former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili has also not received unequivocal support within the party. And among GD supporters and those who want to keep UNM and Saakashvili’s people out of power, Ivanishvili’s far-reaching control and his own interests as Georgia’s richest man also begin to result in political fatigue.

Nevertheless, recognising Zurabishvili’s poor performance, the GD started to change billboards in preparation for the second round, replacing her with leading GD figures like Ivanishvili himself or parliament speaker Irakli Kobakhidze. Erasing Zurabishvili from the billboards the ruling party tries to imbue voters with the feeling that the choice is between the GD and the UNM. This, of course, turns the election even more explicitly into a referendum on the GD government, when, for the past two years, negative political developments have been overshadowing the GD’s few successes, like obtaining visa-free travel to the EU.

Signs of stagnation are plenty. There are concerns about undue political influence on public life manifested in citizens protesting on the main street of Tbilisi against special operations in the popular nightclubs Bassiani and Café Gallery.¹⁴ Demonstrations also addressed the suspicious murder of a teenager and the question of its fair investigation.¹⁵ Controversial nation-wide discussions erupted over several other issues: the ownership of the Rustavi-2 TV channel, the Subeliani tape scandal that implicated officials, including the former Chief Prosecutor, in being actively involved in serious case-fixing,¹⁶ the legalisation of the marijuana

¹¹ *Civil Georgia* (2018): „Vashadze Wins Big Cities, Foreign Vote”. 29 October 2018. Available: <https://civil.ge/archives/262328>

¹² *O-media* (2018): Presidential Elections 2018. Preliminary Results. Available: <https://on.ge/elections/2018/results>

¹³ O’Brochta, W: "Regional autonomy in rich regions: evidence from Ajara, Georgia" *Caucasus Survey*, Vol. 6. 2018 Issue 1.

¹⁴ *Radio Free Europe* (2018): „Georgian Police Raid On Clubs Triggers Protests”. 12 May 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-tbilisi-police-protest/29223058.html>

¹⁵ *Georgia Today* (2018): „The Teen Murder Case & Protests Summarized”. 4 June 2018. Available: <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/10611/The-Teen-Murder-Case-%26-Protests-Summarized>

¹⁶ *JAMnews* (2018): „Пытки, похищения, сфабрикованные дела — опубликованы откровения бывшего грузинского прокурора”. 15 October 2018. Available: <https://jam-news.net/пытки-похищения-сфабрикованные-дела/?lang=ru>

production in Georgia,¹⁷ as well as the re-opening of the case regarding Saakashvili sanctioning the murder of the billionaire, philanthropist and political opponent, Badri Patarkatsishvili.¹⁸

The 2018 Freedom House Nations in Transit report underlines the creeping setbacks in the democratic development of Georgia.¹⁹ A public opinion poll conducted by NDI and CRRC in June 2018 found that 62 per cent of Georgians think their country is mainly or definitely going in the wrong direction, while only 29 percent believe the contrary. Citizens are witnessing a deterioration of socio-economic conditions and are mostly concerned with jobs, poverty, and inflation. Another important concern is the perception of an unfair judiciary system, 69 percent of respondents think courts are in favour of some citizens over others. Still, support for the country joining NATO and EU remains extremely high. However, the uncertain membership perspective coupled with stagnant conflict resolution in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and a high political polarisation put the accountability of the ruling Georgian Dream in the forefront of the political discussion.

Future Outlook

The demand for new forces and faces that might revitalise Georgian politics is growing. Many citizens are increasingly disillusioned with the GD, tired of them blaming all kind of failures on the UNM, the „Ivanishvili-fatigue” is evident. The UNM was able to make it to the second round against all odds, but many still remember Saakashvili’s abuse of power and the 2008 war too well to gain widespread support. From time to time, the establishment of a third political power is being proposed, more recently by Aleko Elisashvili, a locally popular former candidate for Mayor of Tbilisi.²⁰ However, the lack of success of smaller parties, like Girchi and their candidate Zurab Japaridze, beyond the capital portrays the difficulties of newer formations in the current situation. European Georgia, despite their leader’s third-place finish, is still too closely associated with Saakashvili to stand for a true renewal.

If Zurabishvili wins in the second round, the main dilemma concerning the future of the country can be formulated as follows: either the GD will manage to pull itself together very soon, as Ivanishvili promised,²¹ or the unrests will multiply as anger grows, with the risk of demands for regime change. Although the president will not be able to directly influence policy,

¹⁷ *Radio Free Europe* (2018): „Georgian Parliament Postpones Debate On Cannabis Cultivation Bill”. 10 October 2018. Available: <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgian-parliament-postpones-debate-on-cannabis-cultivation-bill/29536062.html>

¹⁸ Morrison, T (2018): „Prosecutor’s Office Solves Patarkatsishvili’s Murder Plot”. *Georgia Today*, 17 October 2018. Available: <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/12767/Prosecutor%E2%80%99s-Office-Solves-Patarkatsishvili%E2%80%99s-Murder-Plot>

¹⁹ *Freedom House* (2018): „Nations in Transit 2018: Confronting Illiberalism”. Available: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_NationsInTransit_Web_PDF_FINAL_2018_03_16.pdf.

²⁰ *Sova.News* (2018): „Алеко Элисашвили намерен создать третью политическую силу”. 7 November 2018. Available: <https://sova.news/2018/11/07/aleko-elisashvili-nameren-sozdat-tretyu-politicheskuyu-silu/>

²¹ *JAMnews* (2018): „Что сказал человек, правящий Грузией? За пять дней до выборов Иванишвили дал большое интервью”. 24 October 2018. Available: <https://jam-news.net/что-сказал-человек-правлящий-грузией/?lang=ru>

if Georgians choose Vashadze we could see two main consequences. First, the UNM will receive a strong public presence through the voice of the head of the state. This might prove sufficient to undermine the currently poorly performing ruling party. Second, the current President Margvelashvili, despite being elected as the GD candidate, has occasionally clashed with the government. Such conflicts are likely to become more severe and more frequent would Vashadze become president. This might further amplify public discontent with the governing party in the run-up to the next parliamentary elections, scheduled for no later than October 2020, when the real hold on power in Georgia is at stake.

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