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# Free, Fair and Equal Electoral-Political 2022-2025 Cycle in Georgia

**NEWSLETTER №43**  
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# INTRODUCTION

Since August 2019, the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) started the implementation of the project Free, Fair and Equal Election electoral political cycle during the years of 2022-2025 throughout Georgia. One of the goals of the project is to promote the improvement of the election environment through monitoring and evidence-based advocacy. In order to achieve this, the organization will monitor ongoing policy processes and develop recommendations that will be communicated to the public and presented to decision-makers. At the moment we present Newsletter #43, which describes the events of April, that have had an impact on the political environment.

## 1. MID-TERM AND EXTRAORDINARY ELECTIONS OF THE PARLIAMENT AND SAKREBULOS OF GEORGIA

On April 29, Georgian citizens took part in the interim/extraordinary elections held in 10 municipalities. Mayoral elections were held in 2 municipalities, majority members were chosen in councils of 5 municipalities, and majority deputies in 3 municipalities. 164 polling stations were opened for the interim/extraordinary elections.<sup>1</sup> In these elections, the election administration used electronic technologies on a large scale.<sup>2</sup> Voting was held at 117 polling stations using voter verification, voting and counting machines.<sup>3</sup> In the remaining 47 election precincts, voting took place according to the traditional procedure.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Central Election Commission (“CEC”), only one candidate, Davit Zalkaniani (“Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia”) participated in the mayoral elections held in Tsageri Municipality, and he received 100% of the votes. The same occurred in Terjola, where Manuchar Robakidze (“Georgian Dream”) received 100% of the votes.<sup>5</sup> One candidate participated and received 100% of votes in the following constituencies: Majority Constituency of Kutaisi - Mikheil Giorgadze (“Georgian Dream”); Akhaltsikhe Majority District - Roini Nebadze (“Georgian Dream”); Tianeti Majority District - Ioseb Mathureli (“Georgian Dream”); Gurjaani Majority District - Zurabi Mukhulishvili (“Georgian Dream”).<sup>6</sup> Two candidates participated in Tkibuli majority district - Giorgi Kereselidze (“Georgian Dream” - 87%) and Giorgi Gagoshidze (independent - 13%).<sup>7</sup> Kakha Kukava’s political party “Free Georgia” participated in the parliamentary majoritarian elections in Poti, Khobi and Senaki districts along with “Georgian Dream”. The election results are as follows: Giorgi Khakhubia (“Georgian Dream” - 95%) and Besiki Tsuleiskiri (“Free Georgia” - 5%).<sup>8</sup> According to the CEC, 55 international observers from the election administrations of 12 countries, as well as international organizations and embassies, observed the election process.<sup>9</sup> According to their assessment, the elections took place in a calm and organized environment.<sup>10</sup> Voting was held electronically in 117 out of 165 precincts.<sup>11</sup>

“The Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association” (GYLA) observed interim elections of the City Council in the majority district of Kutaisi. Due to the fact that turnout was rather low (in the case of Kutaisi, 21%), it is difficult to accurately identify issues that may accompany the use of electronic technologies and the increased number of voters in precincts. Election day passed in a calm environment, there were no significant violations, however, despite the fact that elections were held in a non-competitive environment, there were cases of voter tallying.

<sup>1</sup> “CEC Announces Preliminary Results of April 29 Midterm/Extraordinary Elections”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, May 1, 2023, available at: CEC Announces Preliminary Results of April 29 Midterm/Extraordinary Elections – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>2</sup> “By/Extraordinary Elections Will Be Held On April 29”, CEC Website, February 20, 2023, Available: By/Extraordinary Elections will be Held on April 29 | cesko, accessed: 05.05.2023.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “CEC Announces Preliminary Results of April 29 Midterm/Extraordinary Elections”, Information Portal “civil.ge”.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Regarding the use of electronic technologies, according to our observations, there were defects in the operation of electronic devices, however, these did not prevent the voting process in mentioned areas. The need to increase awareness of both citizens and representatives of the election administration was revealed. One of the main concerns observed is cases of vote privacy rule violations during the voting process.

## 2. “INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE” (IRI) RE-SEARCH RESULTS”

On April 25, the “International Republican Institute” (IRI) published the results of an updated public opinion poll.<sup>12</sup> According to it, joining the European Union has the strong support of Georgian citizens.<sup>13</sup> A majority of respondents express a lack of trust in political parties. To the question - if the elections were held this Saturday, which political party would you vote for? - In the first election, 19% nominated “Georgian Dream”, 14% nominated the “United National Movement” (UNM), 3% - 3% nominated Giorgi Gakharia’s “Georgia” and “Girchi Meti Tavisupleba”, 2% - 2% and - “Labor Party”, “Lelo for Georgia” and “Girchi”.<sup>14</sup>

89% of respondents fully or largely support the country’s accession to the European Union; As for NATO, 80% of respondents fully or largely support the country’s joining the North Atlantic Alliance.<sup>15</sup>

The IRI study was evaluated by the political majority. According to the Vice-Speaker of Parliament, Archil Talakvadze, despite similar results in previous polls, the governing party received significantly more votes than the opposition.<sup>16</sup> According to the chairman of “ENM” Levan Khabeishvili, research showed that the rating of “ENM” increased.<sup>17</sup>

## 3. EU-GEORGIA RELATIONS

On April 20, a document prepared by non-governmental organizations was published under the name - “State of the fulfilment of the 12 conditions of the European Union”.<sup>18</sup> The document focuses on each of the EU’s priorities and discusses how much they have been met, and what remains unsolved.<sup>19</sup> According to research, only one point of the 12-point plan has been fully implemented, two have been largely implemented, four have been partially implemented, and five have not been implemented at all.<sup>20</sup> According to the document, depolarization, a prioritized task was not fulfilled, and despite expectations that it would decrease, Georgia’s political polarization only deepened.<sup>21</sup>

The document states that some elements of the electoral and institutional reform priorities have been met, but not all.<sup>22</sup> Parliament failed to elect the chairman of the Central Election Commission.<sup>23</sup> In addition, some decisive joint recommendations of the OSCE/ODIR and the Venice Commission, such as the delimitation of electoral constituencies, refinement of media campaign regulations, preventive measures against voter intimidation, etc. -

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<sup>12</sup> “National Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Georgia | March 2023”, International Republican Institute (IRI) Website, April 23, 2023, available at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-public-opinion-survey-of-residents-of-georgia-march-2023/>, accessed: 05.05.2023; “IRI Poll Shows Strong Support of Georgian Citizens for EU Membership”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, April 25, 2023, available at: IRI Poll Shows Strong Support of Georgian Citizens for EU Membership – Civil Georgia, accessed: 05.05.2023.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> “Politicians React to IRI’s Public Opinion Poll”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, April 26, 2023 available at: Politicians React to IRI’s Public Opinion Poll – Civil Georgia, accessed: 05.05.2023.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Tracking Georgia’s Reforms: An Analysis of 12 EU Conditionalities”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, April 21, 2023, available at: Tracking Georgia’s Reforms: An Analysis of 12 EU Conditionalities – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

were not taken into account.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the 5% electoral threshold remains unchanged, electoral blocs are not allowed, which leaves the opposition parties in unfavourable conditions for the 2024 parliamentary elections.<sup>25</sup>

### **Visit of Polish Foreign Minister**

On April 26-18, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Zbigniew Rau, visited Tbilisi.<sup>26</sup> He held meetings with President Salome Zourabichvili, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili and Georgian colleague Ilia Darchiashvili.<sup>27</sup> According to Zbigniew Rao, Poland consistently supports and will continue to support the aspirations of Georgian society towards European and transatlantic integration.<sup>28</sup>

### **Visit of the Chairman of the OSCE/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIR)**

On April 10-11, the Acting Chairman of the OSCE, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, Buyar Osman, paid an official visit to Georgia.<sup>29</sup> He met with President Salome Zourabichvili, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili, Georgian colleague Ilia Darchiashvili, Minister of State for Reconciliation and Civil Equality Thea Akhvediani, Speaker of the Parliament and civil sector representatives.<sup>30</sup> According to Buaren Osimani, the OSCE continues to support Georgia and work to strengthen cooperation.<sup>31</sup>

### **Cancelled Visit of the President To Strasbourg**

On April 14, President Salome Zourabichvili cancelled her planned visit to Strasbourg, where she was scheduled to speak in front of the European Parliament.<sup>32</sup> According to the statement released by the President's administration, this decision was made due to the artificially prolonged approval process on the part of the Government of Georgia.<sup>33</sup> The administration of government soon responded to the president's statement and noted that information indicating that the government of Georgia artificially delayed the approval process, which apparently became the reason for the postponement of the visit, is false.<sup>34</sup>

### **Statement of an American Senator**

On April 26, at a session of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which discussed the USAID budget for 2024, American Senator Gene Shahin said that there is an internal struggle between autocracy and democracy in Georgia.<sup>35</sup> According to the senator, one of the defining opportunities for Georgia will be the upcoming elections in 2024.<sup>36</sup> According to Jin Shahini, the US will play a critical role in supporting Georgia, the senator also spoke about the need to send an observation mission to Georgia for the 2024 parliamentary elections.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> "Tracking Georgia's Reforms: An Analysis of 12 EU Conditionalities", Information Portal "civil.ge".

<sup>26</sup> "Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau Visits Georgia" Information Portal "civil.ge", April 21, 2023, available at: Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau Visits Georgia – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "President Cancels Visit to Strasbourg where she was Due to Address European Parliament", Information Portal "civil.ge", April 14, 2023, available at: President Cancels Visit to Strasbourg where she was Due to Address European Parliament – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> "US Senator Jeanne Shaheen: There is an internal battle going on between autocracy and democracy in Georgia", Information Portal "civil.ge", April 28, 2023, available at: US Senator Jeanne Shaheen: There is an internal battle going on between autocracy and democracy in Georgia – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## Debate in UK Parliament

MP of Great Britain, Adam Holloway (The Tories) criticized Georgia’s ruling party, “Georgian Dream” and called it a pro-Putinist, pro-Russian group during a debate held in the UK parliament on April 27, dedicated to the political and security situation in Georgia.<sup>38</sup> According to the MP, the Georgian government may turn the country into a Russian proxy in such an important region for global security.<sup>39</sup> During the debate, the MPs confirmed the strong support of Great Britain for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, for the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia and for the reforms needed to strengthen the democratic institutions of Georgia.<sup>40</sup>

## Party of European Socialists (PES) about the Georgian dream

On April 28, representatives of various political parties and organizations united in the Party of European Socialists (PES) gathered online and, among other things, discussed the situation surrounding the party’s observer member, “Georgian Dream”.<sup>41</sup> PES expressed serious concern over the recent actions and statements of Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili.<sup>42</sup> As is known, this week Prime Minister Gharibashvili is planning to make a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, hosted by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.<sup>43</sup>

PES Executive Secretary General Giacomo Filibek said that “if the Prime Minister wants to share values with Viktor Orban from the PES observer party and the American Conservative Political Action Conference, then the status of “Georgian Dream” in PES will be reviewed.”<sup>44</sup> The issue related to the observer membership of “Georgian Dream” was previously raised by PES President Stefan Lofven at the meeting held in March, and it is planned to be discussed and revised at the next meeting of the chairmanship in June 2023.<sup>45</sup>

# 4. PROTESTS BY POLITICAL PARTIES IN TBILISI

## Protests Organized by the “United National Movement” (UNM)

On April 9, in Tbilisi, near the Parliament building, a protest organized by the party “ENM” was held under the name “Together in Europe”.<sup>46</sup> The members, supporters, activists, other opposition politicians as well as ordinary citizens gathered near Parliament to state their position that citizens of Georgia will not accept the Russification of the country and further loss of freedom.<sup>47</sup>

The chairman of “ENM” pronounced demands of the rally to the public, among which was the release of 21-year-old Lazare Grigoriadis, arrested on charges of throwing a “Molotov cocktail”, the “immediate resignation” of judges sanctioned by the US State Department; He mentioned the release of the imprisoned ex-president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili and the director of the media outlet “Main Channel” Nika Gvaramia, as well as adoption of the law on de-oligarchization, a reform of the judicial system and the Central Election Commission.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Georgian Dream Slammed at UK Parliament Hearing on Georgia”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, April 29, 2023, available at: Georgian Dream Slammed at UK Parliament Hearing on Georgia – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> “PES Concerned Over GD’s Alignment with Conservative Forum in Budapest”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, available at: Information Portal “civil.ge”, May 1, 2023, available at: PES Concerned Over GD’s Alignment with Conservative Forum in Budapest – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> ““Together in Europe” – UNM Holds Rally in Front of Parliament”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, April 10, 2023, available at: “Together in Europe” – UNM Holds Rally in Front of Parliament – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

## Protests titled “I’m coming - Georgia first”

On April 30, the “Ai Utsnobma” movement held a rally under the name “I’m coming - Georgia first” and the slogan “No to war! Peace to our country” on Republic Square.<sup>49</sup> Vato Shakarashvili, a former deputy of the “Georgian Dream” in the Tbilisi City Council, referred to Georgia’s international partners as restless friends and called on people to consider what Georgia actually needs.<sup>50</sup> He questioned the value of pursuing unrealistic plans and goals for NATO membership, suggesting instead that Georgia prioritize neutrality. He also said that Georgia should not expect a positive response from the European Union, as it believes that international partners are punishing the country for maintaining peace.<sup>51</sup>

## 5. IMPRISONMENT OF NIKA GVARAMIA

On April 21, eleven international organizations defending human rights and freedom of the press sent a joint letter to the President of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, and asked for Nika Gvaramia, the director of the “Main Channel” TV company, to be pardoned.<sup>52</sup> The organizations emphasized the importance of free and independent media in a democratic society and called on the President to take this step to advance on the path towards the European Union.<sup>53</sup>

In the letter, the organizations congratulated the Georgian people for recalling the draft law on “foreign agents” from parliament and called on the president to take an important step towards freedom of the press, use the power at her disposal and release Nika Gvaramia from prison.<sup>54</sup> According to them, the trial of Gvaramia, who was sentenced to 3.5 years in prison on May 16, 2022, for abuse of official authority, caused concern among several international organizations, the US Embassy, the former Public Defender of Georgia, as well as local and international human rights organizations and assessed his imprisonment as politically motivated.<sup>55</sup>

According to US Ambassador Kelly Degnan, the Helsinki Commission is a highly respected organization that has a mandate from the US Congress to monitor human rights around the world, including media freedom.<sup>56</sup> According to the ambassador, this organization, as well as others, including the US Embassy, have clearly stated their concerns about the Gvaramia case.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, she indicated that any decision to pardon individuals is to be made by President Zourabichvili herself.<sup>58</sup>

## 6. CASE OF MIKHEIL SAAKASHVILI

On April 4, the conclusion of an expert group created by the public defender to monitor the health condition of the imprisoned ex-president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, was published, according to which Saakashvili’s condition worsened after the February visit.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “Ultra-Conservative Movement Presents its Demands at April 30th Rally”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, May 1, 2023, available at: Information Portal “civil.ge”, available at: Ultra-Conservative Movement Presents its Demands at April 30th Rally – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> “International Organizations Call on President of Georgia to Release Nika Gvaramia”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, April 21, 2023, available at: International Organizations Call on President of Georgia to Release Nika Gvaramia – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “EU and US Ambassadors: Nika Gvaramia’s Pardon is up to Georgia’s President”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, April 24, 2023, available at: EU and US Ambassadors: Nika Gvaramia’s Pardon is up to Georgia’s President – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> “Doctors Invited by the Public Defender Asses Saakashvili’s Health”, Information Portal “civil.ge”, 2023 წლის 4 აპრილი available at: Doctors Invited by the Public Defender Asses Saakashvili’s Health – Civil Georgia, accessed: 03.05.2023

MP from Great Britain, Adam Holloway (The Tories) during a debate held in UK Parliament on April 27, dedicated his time to talking about the political and security situation in Georgia.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, the MP spoke of ex-president Saakashvili's imprisonment and said that independent doctors confirmed traces of heavy metal poisoning in Saakashvili's blood and he may die in the hospital.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> "Georgian Dream Slammed at UK Parliament Hearing on Georgia", Information Portal "civil.ge".

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.