POST-ELECTION CRISIS IN GEORGIA

Ruling party declares victory as opposition rejects election results amidst allegations of voter fraud

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SUMMARY

Georgia is bracing itself for (yet another) post-election crisis after pro-EU opposition parties rejected the results of this weekend's parliamentary elections, citing allegations of large-scale election fraud, voter intimidation and election interference.

With nearly 100% of the votes counted, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party of billionaire ex-Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili officially secured more than 54% of the popular vote in an election held under a fully proportional system for the first time. The four pro-EU opposition blocs, which sought to end 12 years of GD rule, received less than 40%. Domestic and international observers have also reported irregularities, while the EU has expressed concerns and called on Georgia to investigate the allegations.

At the time of writing, Georgia's political future remains widely uncertain. Aretera's baseline scenario assumes a post-election crisis with no clear end in sight, accompanied by anti-government protests and calls for a re-run election. Based on the series of protests held since 2020 and the country's increasingly polarized political environment, Georgian authorities may crack down on forthcoming protests but also on the democratic opposition, while alleged Russian interference remains a concern. In view of the anti-government protests held after the last parliamentary elections in 2020 (when the opposition also rejected the results), the upcoming crisis may reach a point where EU mediation is required (as it was four years ago).

The post-election crisis is expected to have a profound impact on Georgia's EU membership bid, while the upcoming days will prove crucial for determining the country's political future. International investors are advised to closely monitor the political situation.

Below, Aretera takes a deeper look at Georgia's post-election landscape, the possible forward scenarios, as well as their possible political and policy implications.

POST-ELECTION LANDSCAPE

On 26th October, Georgian voters went to the polls to elect the 150 members of the country's unicameral parliament in a high-stakes electoral contest that was also its first fully proportional election[1]. With nearly 100% of the votes counted, and at a turnout of 59%, the ruling Georgian Dream party (GD) of billionaire ex-Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvilli has won the elections, securing more than 54% of the popular vote.

Four other (predominantly pro-EU) formations have passed the 5% threshold to enter parliament, all of which were hoping to put an end to 12 years of GD rule. These include the Unity to Save Georgia (led by the former ruling United National Movement – UNM), the liberal-progressive Coalition for Change (a multi-party alliance involving ex-UNM politicians), as well as two alliances positioning themselves above Georgia's traditional GD-UNM divide: the Strong Georgia alliance of Mamuka Kazharadze and the For Georgia party of former GD-nominated Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia.

Combined, the four opposition blocs secured just 37.6% of the vote, well below what was predicted by independent pollsters and exit polls. Georgians living abroad overwhelmingly supported the pro-EU opposition parties. Notably, the Coalition for Challenge has also overtaken the UNM-led bloc as the country's most popular opposition formation, while the openly pro-Kremlin Alliance of Patriots secured only 2.4% and thus fell out of parliament.

WIDESPREAD ALLEGATIONS OF VOTER FRAUD

Responding to exit polls, which showed conflicting results shortly after polls were closed on 26th October, both the ruling party and the opposition bloc declared victory well before the official results were published by the Central Election Commission of Georgia. When the final results claimed the ruling GD won with more than 54%, all four opposition blocs refused to accept the results amidst mounting allegations of widespread voter fraud across the country.

Domestic watch groups found that the election was marred by intimidation, interference, vote buying and even physical violence, while international observers, including the OSCE, also cited a series of irregularities and concerns over democratic backsliding (although refrained from stating that the election was not free). Meanwhile, the EU has called on Georgia's authorities to investigate the fraud allegations, while the post-election uncertainty will also be discussed during the next informal meeting of the European Council. Responding to the allegations, Georgian Dream officials accused the opposition of attempting to steal the elections and staging protests to do so.

PRESIDENT CALLS FOR PROTESTS AFTER DISPUTED ELECTIONS

Speaking at a joint conference with the leaders of the pro-EU opposition on the evening of 27th October, Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili said she does not recognize the elections as free and fair, stressing that technology was used to alter the results of online voting systems and that Georgia has become a victim of Russian special operations.

Zurabishvili, who became head of state with support from GD in 2018 but has since then split from the ruling bloc over its anti-EU rhetoric and has emerged as an unofficial leader of the pro-EU opposition, called on Georgian citizens to peacefully demonstrate against what she called a rigged election.

[1] See here for Aretera's pre-election forecast from 17 October 2024

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Parliamentary Election Results Breakdown				
Party/Alliance	**Popular Vote (%) – 2024**	**Projected Number of MPs**	**Popular Vote (%) – 2020**	**Number of MPs**
Georgian Dream	54.1	89	48.2	90
Coalition for Change	10.9	18	ran separately*	-
Unity to Save Georgia	10.1	17	ran separately*	-
Strong Georgia	8.8	14	ran separately*	-
Gakharia For Georgia	7.8	12	did not run	-
Girchi	3	0	2.9	0
Alliance of Patriots	2.4	0	3.2	4
Labour Party	0.7	0	1	1
(…)				
Total	100	150	100	150

Source: Central Election Commission of Georgia. *Coalition for Change, Unity to Save Georgia and Strong Georgia are all electoral coalitions of multiple parties which ran in a different format in the 2020 elections.

POSSIBLE FORWARD SCENARIOS

At the time of writing, Georgia's political future remains widely uncertain but a major domestic political crisis seems inevitable. Below, we outline the possible forward scenarios, with much to depend on potential domestic developments and international reactions:

Aretera's baseline scenario assumes a post-election crisis with no clear end in sight. The opposition Coalition for Change alliance and the United National Movement have already announced that they will boycott parliament, with the rest of the parliamentary opposition expected to follow suit. The elections will most likely be followed by anti-government protests – led by the pro-EU opposition and President Zurabishvili – with calls for new (and fair) elections. These protests may last for weeks (if not months) if the ruling GD, as expected, does not respond. A lasting crisis will deepen political polarization and domestic political uncertainty.

Lasting protests may be followed by a police crackdown. Based on the experience of a series of anti-government protests held in Georgia in the last four years, the country's government-controlled authorities may crack down on the upcoming demonstrations, particularly in the case of a lasting and large-scale protests movement. In the long run, the government may also choose to crack down on the opposition if the protest movement is seen as a threat to GD's rule. Notably, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze has vowed to ban several opposition parties if Georgian Dream wins the election. Simultaneously, Russia may also interfere with Georgia's post-election processes to ensure that the pro-EU opposition stays out of government.

A deepening crisis may require international (EU) mediation. Held in 2020, the last parliamentary election, in which GD secured an overwhelming but disputed victory, also led to a major political crisis followed by weeks of anti-government protests and a boycott of the Georgian parliament.

Following the arrest of then-UNM leader Nika Melia, the crisis was so far reaching that only EU mediation convinced the two sides to reach a political settlement in April 2021 (although the UNM eventually refused to sign the EU-brokered agreement, while Georgian Dream later withdrew from it). If the current crisis follows a similar path, the EU will most likely offer to mediate between the two sides again to reach a political settlement. At the same time, this may prove more difficult as the critics of the government claim that the ruling GD has become more anti-European in recent years (despite .PM Kobakhidze insisting that securing EU membership by 2030 remains a top priority for the government).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In the case of a potential crackdown on future protests and the opposition, Georgia's EU membership bid will most likely be suspended. While the country received EU candidate status in December 2023, the EU noted at the time that this was a recognition of the aspirations of Georgia's citizens rather than the results of the government's actions. Since then, bilateral relations have deteriorated, primarily due to Georgia's recent "foreign agent law", the adoption of anti-LGBT+ legislation and threats to ban a part of the Georgian opposition. This scenario can be averted only if the government and the opposition manage to reach a political settlement, which seems unlikely at this point.

Simultaneously, Georgia seeks to maintain closer relations to Russia and China, both politically and economically. The ruling GD, which has sought to normalize Georgia's relations with Moscow since 2012 and has been repeatedly accused of cozying up to the Kremlin, is looking to further cement its ties with Russia by formally "apologizing" for the 2008 Russo-Georgian War (which resulted in Georgia losing 20% of its territory to Moscow). In addition, GD is increasingly looking to inject Chinese investment into the economy through joint projects in infrastructure, construction and energy.

LOOKING AHEAD

The first session of the new parliament is scheduled to be held within ten days of Georgia's CEC publishing the official election results. The upcoming few days will prove crucial for determining Georgia's political future and will ultimately decide whether the country will plunge into yet another post-election crisis. International investors are advised to closely monitor the political situation.

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If you would like to schedule a discussion of this paper, please contact:
Pavel Melnikov, Aretera's Regional Director for Central Asia & the South Caucasus at P.Melnikov@AreteraPA.com

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