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‘The elections were not fair’

Marcel Röthig on the outcomes of the Georgian election, suspected voter manipulation and reactions from abroad

In spite of a historic voter turnout, a change of power did not take place: the ruling party ‘Georgian Dream’ won the elections. Can this only be explained by electoral fraud?

The elections were not fair. However, even the international election observation missions are unable to assess whether the reported violations are sufficient to challenge the result. This was the first time that voting machines were used. The legally binding manual recount did not show any significant difference to the automated electronic result. The votes cast should therefore have been recorded correctly for the most part.

However, numerous cases of election interference were documented, particularly in areas with ethnic minorities and in rural regions, where the ruling party received up to 90 per cent of the vote in some cases. There was vote buying, multiple voting, attempts to exert influence in the polling booth and pressure on civil servants and socially disadvantaged voter groups. In the run-up to the election, there were already reports that the ID cards of some Georgian Dream voters and civil servants had been confiscated. The opposition and local election monitoring NGOs alleged that by withholding the IDs, their data was fed into several voting machines in different districts, enabling them to vote multiple times. This can only be verified by granting access to the lists at a later date. It was also documented that there was often no ink or only water for the obligatory fingerprints that were supposed to prevent multiple voting. There were also individual cases of violence and restrictions against independent or opposition-affiliated election observers.

However, even the opposition-leaning exit polls gave the Georgian Dream just over 40 per cent. It is not possible to say for sure whether the documented irregularities made the decisive difference in the end result. Due to this lack of clarity, the international election observers have been very critical, but have not clearly stated that the elections cannot be recognized either.

How has the Georgian Dream managed to stay in power for 12 years despite unpopular measures such as the so-called 'agent law'?

The high level of support for the Georgian Dream can also be explained by its economic and socio-political achievements since 2012. Sustained double-digit growth, rising wages and a strikingly high number of infrastructure projects inaugurated shortly before the elections have ensured a stable core voter base. Even before the elections, it was expected that the party would emerge as the strongest force. In addition, the party has occasionally stoked anti-European sentiment and agitated against civil society and the LGBTI community. It was able to draw on broad media support and encountered a population that is more inclined towards conservative ideas anyway.

However, the medium-term prospects for the economy are less rosy: in the days leading up to the election, the national bank had to stabilise the national currency by selling dollars on several occasions. Georgia is also likely to become less attractive for Western investment in an increasingly authoritarian environment. So, the question also arises as to how much longer this can continue.

What is the balance of power in parliament and which other parties play a role?

The Georgian Dream has failed to achieve its stated election goal of a majority large enough to amend the constitution. This means that it cannot implement its most controversial proposals, such as banning opposition parties, unless individual MPs from those parties vote in favour or defect.

The opposition is split into four factions: former President Mikheil Saakashvili's 'Unity – National Movement' alliance is just behind the new 'Coalition for Change', which was largely founded by former supporters of Saakashvili. Then there is 'Strong Georgia', the product of a merger between the liberal 'Lelo' party and left-wing parties and activists involved in the protests against the secret service law. Finally, there is the newly-founded 'For Georgia' party, led by former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia — a self-declared social-democratic party. The latter two, in particular, have managed to emerge as a third force beyond the controversial figure of Saakashvili and offer the disappointed voters of the Georgian Dream an alternative.

It is likely, however, that all the opposition parties will not take up their seats and will support the protests called for by President Salome Zourabichvili. They are demanding new elections. As a result, it is not possible to carry out substantive parliamentary work and the ruling party can push through its legislative proposals, for which a simple

majority is sufficient, without debate.

The opposition and the president are talking about a 'constitutional coup' by the Georgian Dream and have announced protests. Is a revolutionary scenario conceivable in Georgia?

The election observers' statement that although there was clear manipulation and vote-buying, it cannot be established beyond doubt whether this changed the election result proves to be a heavy burden for the protest. Moreover, the fact that the protests only started two days after the polling stations had closed makes them seem haphazard. There is a risk that the opposition will miss the momentum for a clear mobilisation and that disappointment will spread. In view of the unclear situation, the protest threatens to either die down or tip over into radicalisation. The experience of the weeks-long mass protests against the 'agent law' shows that even large protests can fizzle out over time. The ruling party seems to be speculating on this.

However, if the protests were to gain massive momentum, there is a risk of violence and uncontrollable developments as in Ukraine in 2014. Germany and the EU are advised to advocate the early mediation of a round table. The round table during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, which played a key role in facilitating a peaceful solution, could serve as a model. Such a round table could be moderated by Germany, France and Central Eastern European states, such as Slovakia. It would also be conceivable to send a recognised political figure without current office to mediate, who is recognised by both sides, above all by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the billionaire behind the Georgian Dream.

How is the West reacting? Is there still hope for a European future for Georgia?

At the moment, it seems as if the EU is reacting with the brakes on. Once again, however, the EU also appears divided, as Viktor Orbán was one of the first to congratulate the Georgian Dream before the polling stations closed and is travelling to Georgia on Monday and Tuesday to give his blessing to the ruling party. The fears in Brussels are apparently too great that Georgia could be lost — which could have an impact on the entire South Caucasus, especially Armenia's timid European course. Apparently, some are too concerned that the basis for questioning the election result is too shaky. At the same time, the opposition is dependent on international support. The EU should demand clarity and transparency from the Georgian government regarding the allegations of multiple voting - for example by allowing neutral observers to inspect the electoral registers. Although the EU

wants to react to obvious electoral fraud, sanctions are unlikely in view of Hungary's stance. However, the cancellation of visa-free travel would be conceivable — a measure that would be more likely to affect the population. A continuation of the EU integration process is therefore hardly realistic for the time being.

The reaction of the US could be more significant: Tough financial and personal sanctions can be expected here. Tbilisi, on the other hand, is apparently banking on an election victory for Donald Trump in the hope that Washington's interest in the South Caucasus could wane.

This interview was conducted by Olga Vasyltsova.



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