



Evaluation of the pre-election environment of the 2018 presidential runoff

Based on the outcome of the October 28, 2018 presidential election, President of Georgia had to be determined through a runoff election since none of the presidential candidates were able to secure over 50% of votes in the first round. The two candidates with most votes compete in the runoff – the *Georgian Dream* (GD) endorsed independent presidential candidate Salome Zourabichvili and the *United National Movement* (UNM) candidate Grigol Vashadze endorsed by united opposition under the name of *Power in Unity*. Presidential candidate Davit Bakradze – *European Georgia*, and the *Georgian Republican Party* have also publicly endorsed Grigol Vashadze. Salome Zourabichvili has been endorsed by the *Alliance of Patriots of Georgia*.

Compared to the first round, the pre-election period of the presidential runoff was even more polarized and its campaign was distinctively more negative, as manifested in statements made by candidates and their supporters through media, election advertisement and aggressive campaigns on social media.

During the pre-election period of the runoff, major TV companies were highly polarized. Debates between the presidential candidates were not held before the second round and therefore, voters lacked opportunity to see or hear opinions and thematic discussions about the platforms of the candidates. Instead, during the pre-election period public witnessed extreme polarization of political groups supporting the presidential candidates, confrontation, aggressive rhetoric and active use of hate speech.

Immediately after the first round, individual representatives of the ruling party made alarming statements and prognoses about threats of civil war and possible destabilization in case of the win of the opposition candidate, while the UNM representatives announced that following the runoff, if Grigol Vashadze wins, the *Georgian Dream* government will be over.

In the election campaign before the runoff, several public movements with the aim of campaigning against the UNM presidential candidate were created and have become active. This creates suspicions that they are making donations in favor of the independent presidential candidate Salome Zurbishvili. Pre-election messages of some of these groups are markedly negative and aggressive.

During this period, smear campaign against NGOs and their leadership using social media still continued to be active and was aimed at discrediting them.

Violent incidents

Unlike the pre-election campaign of the first round of the presidential election, when almost no acts of physical confrontation and violence happened, during the pre-election period of the runoff numerous cases of physical confrontation took place. After the first round, an alarming incident occurred in Akhalkalaki, when family members and supporters of Akhalkalaki majoritarian MP attacked opposition activists at the office of the united opposition. Most violent incidents targeted opposition party

activists and supporters, and in one case a person was physically assaulted for not voting for Grigol Vashadze. Notably, on November 21, head of Grigol Vashadze's campaign office in Oni, Nodar Burdiladze was stabbed three times in his stomach area late at night in Oni. According to the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Burdiladze was stabbed for an everyday issue, which the united opposition has vehemently denied. Instead, they claim that he was stabbed on political motive.

Intimidation/harassment

During the pre-election period of the runoff, instances of intimidation of voters became widespread and alarming. Observers of the organizations reported that employees of municipal public institutions, private sector employees, socially vulnerable voters and voters with previous conviction experienced pressure. These individuals were mostly urged to vote for Salome Zourabichvili or they received threats because of their support to Grigol Vashadze. Employees of municipal budgetary organizations told observers that they were threatened with dismissal. In isolated cases, the organizations detected instances of dismissal on possible political grounds.

During the pre-election campaign of the presidential runoff, threats were made against the GD endorsed presidential candidate Salome Zourabichvili and her family. In particular, they received death threats through text messages.

Vote buying

During the pre-election period of the second round, number of possible vote buying incidents also grew. The decision of the Government of Georgia to “waive” nearly GEL 1.5 billion worth of financial obligations for 600,000 people, with the aim of garnering voter support, was unprecedented. The program was unveiled on November 19. According to the announcement, with the involvement of the state, Cartu Foundation will write off debts of other financial institutions not exceeding 2,000 Georgian Laris for certain citizens within the period of December 15-31. Additionally, observers of the organizations in different municipalities reported that people were offered money in exchange for voting for Salome Zourabichvili and in some cases people that are

perceived as supporters of Grigol Vashadze are offered money for their ID cards. At the same time, observers of the organizations learned about distribution of produce among voters in some municipalities.

Abuse of administrative resources

After the first round of the election, the Government of Georgia and local authorities started to extensively initiate social and infrastructural projects. Initiatives possibly motivated by election were unveiled about increase in salaries, social assistance, provision of housing, launch of infrastructural projects, which were not known before the first round and mostly serve the purpose of improving wellbeing of socially vulnerable citizens.

Several days before the second round, observer organizations learned about possible identity document forgery. The organizations urged law enforcement authorities to conduct investigation. The prosecutor's office has launched subsequent investigation.

Media environment

Two major television companies were distinctly polarized according to their political preferences. In the beginning of the second round, Imedi TV announced that it would start operating "in an emergency mode", against the UNM and Grigol Vashadze, while Rustavi 2 TV manifestly pursues editorial policy in support of Grigol Vashadze and against Salome Zurbishvili.

Electoral administration

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Despite the call of non-governmental organizations not to do so, the Central Election Commission scheduled Election Day for a weekday, on Wednesday, November 28, which was met with criticism. The decision creates obstacles for voters residing abroad to participate in the election because November 28 will be a workday for them. To reduce the very harm that it caused, the CEC, in violation of the Election Code, extended voting until 24:00 at polling stations created abroad.

Before the CEC's announcement, October 28 was announced as the runoff date by Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze. Prior to that, November 28 was announced as Election Day by two participants of a meeting held by a public movement in support of Salome Zourabichvili in Telavi. These facts possibly indicate that the ruling party and its supporters knew about the date of the election before the CEC officially made the decision.

Campaign financing and its oversight

Following the first round, in the period between October 28 and November 19, two electoral subjects garnered donations totaling GEL 3,489,303. Of which, GEL 2,964,704 (85%) went to Salome Zourabichvili, while Grigol Vashadze received GEL 524,599 (15%).

Similarly to the first round, State Audit Office (SAO) response to possible violations of political party finance regulations was mainly ineffective. Confirmation of these cases protracted and the outcomes were unknown. SAO issued a report only on November 26, which only covers a few violations.

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