

**ELECTION BRIEFING NO 42  
EUROPE AND THE GEORGIAN EXTRAORDINARY  
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND PLEBISCITES,  
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**Key points:**

- This was a pre-term Presidential election in Georgia which was initiated after a series of public protests against the political regime were organised by the opposition parties in the country.
- The current President, Mikheil Saakashvili, won the election at the first round with 53.52% of the vote while the opposition candidate, Levan Gachechiladze, received 25.76%.
- There were widespread allegations of pressure and intimidation used on voters as well as the utilisation of public resources in the campaign of Saakashvili which gave him an unfair advantage over the other candidates.
- The election campaign was highly politicized with candidates debating the fairness of the electoral process rather than policy alternatives.
- Simultaneously with the election, two plebiscites took place on NATO membership and the timing of the next general election in the spring of 2008. Both gathered over 70% public support.

**The Context**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union Georgian politics has been volatile and dangerous. There were a series of coups and periods of public disobedience resulting from the complicated political and economic relations between Georgia and Russia. The first democratic Georgian President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, survived several coup

attempts and was removed from power in January 1992 after weeks of bloody riots that marked the beginning of a civil war in Georgia.

The period of political chaos and public disorder lasted between 1992 and 1994 and ended with the election of an autocratic leader, Eduard Shevardnadze. He remained head of state for eleven years but was ousted in 2003 in Georgian style, following a popular uprising supported by Western powers, which became known as the Rose Revolution.

Contrary to the expectations of Western observers the controversies in Georgian politics did not end with the events of the Rose Revolution. In 2004, Mikheil Saakashvili, the leader of the popular uprising, was elected with 97% of the public vote as the new President of Georgia. He was hugely popular at home and in the West but faced significant challenges in domestic and foreign affairs.

In the country, the state administration was chronically corrupt, unemployment was high and large proportions of the Georgian workforce migrated abroad due to lack of prospects and economic instability. Most importantly, conflict in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia left a quarter-of-a-million people internally displaced in Georgia.

On the international scene, political tensions between Russia and Georgia remained strained due to the territorial disagreement over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Although both territories claimed independence since early 1990s, neither Georgia nor the United Nations recognized them while, at the same time, Georgia accused Russia of secretly supporting the separatist movements there.

In 2006, Russia, a major market for Georgian exports, initiated a series of import restrictions on Georgian goods, including wine, mineral water, vegetables, and fruit. On September 27 2006, Georgia retaliated by arresting four Russian military intelligence officers, whom it accused of espionage. In response, Russia introduced economic sanctions against Georgia including a transportation blockade, suspension of diplomatic relations and aggressive deportation of ethnic Georgians from Russia.

Parliamentary elections in March 2004 gave Saakashvili's ruling National Movement Party an overwhelming majority in Parliament, and its decisive victory in October 2006 local elections further strengthened the Presidential mandate. In December 2006 the Georgian Parliament amended the Constitution to extend its current term and allow for simultaneous Presidential and parliamentary elections at the end of 2008. Parliamentary elections were initially scheduled for April 2008 and a Presidential election for early 2009. In doing so the government sought to de-link the Georgian election cycle from two external events that had the potential to destabilize the political environment in Georgia: the March 2008 Presidential election in Russia, and the announcement of the independence of Kosovo scheduled for around the same time. Opposition parties opposed the amendments claiming that the schedule gave an unfair advantage to the National Movement party.

After months of negotiations, in October 2007 ten opposition parties and movements established the United National Council to co-ordinate their activities and issued four demands to the government. The most important of those was to restore parliamentary

elections to their original date in April 2008. Others included: the creation of new local election commissions with representatives from political parties; a change of the current majoritarian electoral system; and the release of all political prisoners.

The Council organized a series of protest rallies in Kutaisi (October 19), Batumi (October 23), Zugdidi (October 28) and Tbilisi (November 2). These protests drew between a few hundred and a few thousand peaceful demonstrators. While many demonstrators participated in the protests because of their support for the opposition parties, there were those who took part to express their protest against the economic hardships and dis-satisfaction with the current political regime. Until November 3 opposition leaders focused on their original four demands. However, feeling that the government had largely ignored their concerns, they also called for the resignation of President Saakashvili. On the 4 November a few of the demonstrators including the Presidential candidate of the opposition, Levan Gachechiladze, announced a hunger strike.

Every day since the beginning of the demonstrations a small group of protestors would gather in front of parliament and on Rustaveli Avenue in the centre of Tbilisi. On the 7 November without warning police arrested approximately seventy people on a night vigil outside the parliament building. More protestors gathered throughout the day and a series of clashes occurred between them and the police who used water cannons, teargas and rubber bullets against the demonstrators. On that same evening, when the demonstrations had been dispersed officers from the Special Forces with machine guns and other heavy weapons forced their way into the *Imedi* television station founded by Badri Patarkatsishvili, an exiled Georgian businessman with connections to the Russian state. The officers took the channel off the air and intimidated the staff on duty by pointing guns to their heads, kicking them on the floor, using aggressive language and destroying equipment. Footage of the operation was shown live on air, which solidified the civil resistance to the political regime.

The Georgian government put a spin on the situation claiming that the military had resorted to force because Georgia was facing an organised coup d'état by the opposition parties which had acted in collaboration with the Russian counter-intelligence service. They also claimed that Patarkatsishvili, who openly provided financial support to the opposition parties in Georgia, had called for the overthrow of the government.

On the 8 November a state of emergency was declared by the President which remained in place until 16 November. On the same day, Saakashvili proposed to shorten his mandate and subsequently stepped down on 25 November, enabling parliament to call an extraordinary Presidential election on 5 January 2008. The speaker of the parliament, Nino Burjanadze, became acting President. Political negotiations led to amendments of the electoral-legal framework and to the calling of two plebiscites on the timing of the next parliamentary elections and NATO membership simultaneously with the Presidential election.

## **The Election Campaign**

This was the first democratically organised Presidential election in Georgia. Initially, twenty-two candidates expressed an interest to register for the election and the Central

Electoral Commission allowed nineteen of them to begin the collection of the 50,000 signatures required to formalise their registration. Seven candidates were ultimately registered while six applications were turned down because of an insufficient number of signatures. The seven candidates that entered the Presidential contest were: Mikheil Saakshvili (*United National Movement*); Levan Gachechiladze (*United Public Movement*); Davit Gamkrelidze (*New Rights Party*); Shalva Natelashvili (*Labour Party of Georgia*); Gia Maisashvili (*Party of the Future*); Irina Sarishvili (*Hope Party*) and Arkadi Patarkatsishvili (*independent*).

The election environment was highly polarized with candidates concentrating on the fairness of the electoral process rather than policy alternatives. Most observers considered much of the campaigning to be focused on accusations rather than issues. In particular, candidates from the opposition parties were suspicious of the electoral administration and accused the United National Movement of utilising state resources in order to boost the election campaign of Saakshvili. The leaders of the United National Movement countered those claims with the argument that they were maliciously intended to de-stabilise the democratic process.

In fairness, some of those claims were not completely un-grounded. For instance, one of the most publicised issues was the distribution of vouchers for utilities, medicines, tax credits and food, which prominently displayed that they were a subsidy from the President. One way of establishing this relationship was the appearance of the number five (5) on the vouchers which was the number of the ballot used by the President's party since 2004. There were also reports of vouchers being distributed from party offices where recipients were asked to sign documents promising to give their support to Saakshvili.

Moreover, the campaign was over-shadowed by widespread allegations of intimidation and pressure on public sector employees. This included a number of confirmed cases of pressure on opposition supporters by the police and local officials to desist from campaigning, threats of arbitrary arrests or job dismissals and cases of landlords who were pressurised not to let premises for use as opposition campaign offices. On a number of occasions there were confirmed reports of kidnappings and the use of violence and force as a way of altering political orientations.

The national media played a prominent role in the election campaign of all the candidates. Georgia has a diverse media environment, including public and private broadcasting channels and hundreds of press outlets. Although the media enjoys freedom of expression broadcasts on the candidates during the campaign were influenced by the political orientations of the media owners. On the whole, the media coverage appeared un-balanced in favour of Saakshvili who received more air time and positive coverage, especially at the start of the election campaign. The one exception was reports from the *Imedi* station which were critical of Saakshvili and Patarkatsishvili and provided a platform for their rivals. Although all of the candidates relied upon, and invested heavily, in television commercials only Saakshvili appeared on all four national channels.

The main campaign activity for the candidates was rallies and most of them travelled extensively during the course of the campaign. Patarkatsishvili was the only candidate who remained abroad throughout the campaign since he was accused by the

authorities of plotting to overthrow the government in a post-election coup. Two weeks after this announcement he withdrew his bid for the presidency but on the day before the election reversed his decision.

## **The Western versus Russian Debate and Electoral Pledges**

Both the Presidential election in Georgia and (especially) the referendum on NATO membership were framed by many observers of Euro-Asian affairs as a strategic geopolitical choice for the country between a future within the Euro-Atlantic structures (the EU and NATO) and a more 'Eastern' meaning pro-Russian orientation.

However, during the election campaign the debate between East and West did not materialise according to expectations since all but two (Irina Sarishvili and Arkadi Patarkatsishvili) of the Presidential candidates were firm pro-Western and NATO supporters. There was therefore no clear distinction between the position of Mikheil Saakashvili and the opposition candidates that could foster such a debate.

The roots of the pro- NATO consensus could be traced to the benefits for Georgia arising from such membership in resolving the Abkhaz and South Ossetia conflicts. According to the majority of Presidential candidates the conflicts could be easily solved once Russian peacekeepers were removed from the conflict zones and Russia's role as a mediator was eliminated. Saakashvili in particular emphasized his government's efforts to involve the international community and the EU in the conflict resolution. While NATO has been reluctant to become involved with the issue, the EU has stated that Georgia does not need to solve these conflicts as a pre-condition for EU membership.

At a broader level the Presidential candidates established a relationship between NATO membership and the development of strong democratic institutions, a favourable business climate and economic prosperity. This approach was intended to maximize the public support for NATO, presenting it as a solution to domestic issues.

On balance the election was contested on topics of domestic politics. Apart from Saakashvili who made NATO membership, conflict resolution and relationship with the West a locus of his election campaign, the rest of the candidates were primarily concerned with domestic issues. Even Saakashvili had to dedicate some of his campaigning to popular topics of concern and his successful performance at the polls is at least partly due to his pledge to dedicate greater efforts to alleviate poverty which helped ease some grievances against his rule.

Similar electoral pledges came from the opposition. The main contestant Gachechladze promised to encourage economic growth, provide support to small and medium enterprises and alleviate poverty. He also proclaimed himself in favour of a parliamentary system of rule with a constitutional monarchy and offered to abolish the Presidential institution if elected. Gamkrelidze had more or less the same agenda to support either a parliamentary system or constitutional monarchy, promote freedom of speech, extend personal property rights and establish independent judiciary. Natelashvili and Maisashvili pledged respectively to invest in social services and business creation. Patarkatsishvili was the only candidate who expressed support for closer ties with Russia as well as abolishing the presidency and creating a

confederation with a weak central government. Irina Sarishvili, who won an insignificant percentage of the vote, never made her own agenda clear but supported Patarkatishvili in his pledges concerning Russia and the abolishment of the Presidential institution. Judging from the similarity of the electoral pledges of the opposition candidates, one of the major reasons why the opposition parties lost the Presidential contest was because they were unable to agree on a single candidature.

## The Result

As Table 1, shows the election result was a clear win for Saakashvili who received 53.52% of the vote. The candidate of the opposition parties Levan Gachechiladze accumulated 25.76%. The rest of the candidates received less than 10% of public support. The voter turnout at the election was 56.17%. According to election data from the Central Electoral Commission, Gachechiladze came first in Tbilisi and Saakashvili in the provinces. Since Saakashvili accumulated more than 50% of the vote there was no need for a run off.

The results of both plebiscites were positive. On the question of NATO membership 72.5% voted in favour, and on the question of holding the next parliamentary elections in the spring of 2008, 69.8% of voters were in favour.

**Table 1: Results of the Extraordinary Presidential Elections in Georgia, 5 January 2008**

<b>Candidate Name</b>	<b>Percentage of Votes (%)</b>	<b>Number of votes</b>
Mikheil Saakashvili	53.52	1 061 297
Lavan Gachechiladze	25.76	510 897
Arkadi Patarkatsishvili	7.12	141 260
Shalva Natelashvili	6.51	129 023
David Gamkrelidze	4.07	80 671
Giorgi Maisashvili	0.78	15 498
Irina Sarishvili-Chanturia	0.16	3 263
<b>Voter Turnout</b>	<b>56.17</b>	

Source: Central Electoral Commission in Georgia

## Conclusions

There are four conclusions that can be drawn from the 2008 extraordinary Presidential elections in Georgia. First and foremost, the election demonstrated that public support for Mikheil Saakashvili remains strong four years after the Rose Revolution. This is regardless of the heavy-handed military interference at the public demonstrations on the 7 November 2007 and growing dis-satisfaction with the economic reforms of his political regime.

Secondly, the organisation of the opposition parties into a United National Council and their agreement on a join candidate points to a restructuring and consolidation of the party system in Georgia. This is also an indication that Georgia is beginning to shift away from the paradigm of exceptional politics that followed the Rose Revolution towards a more normal environment of competitive politics. However, the process of coalition-building might take longer than expected as indicated by the

recent general election in May 2008 when the opposition parties were unable to stage a united front against National Movement.

Thirdly, electoral politics in Georgia continues to be influenced primarily by the relationship with Russia and the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia remain a major stumbling bloc in foreign policy. Saakashvili's victory at the election is a further blow to Russia's aspirations of restoring its influence in Georgia and particularly his electoral pledge to unify Georgia before the end of his term could contribute to further tensions with Russia.

Lastly, the methods used to win the 2008 Presidential election cause some concern to the quality of democracy in the country. Reports of rigging and intimidation indicate that democracy is still in flux and a return to authoritarianism is not impossible.

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*This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>.*