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Crunch time for Georgia's opposition

Why reforming the 5% electoral threshold is the key to the 2024 election

By Andro Atoev

Over two years have passed since the 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia. The election was the usual Georgian affair: rallies, boycotts, a refusal to accept the results, EU mediation, and plenty of additional political wrangling. As a result, the 10th Parliament of Georgia is semi-functioning, or at least, not reaching its full potential.

The 2020 elections resulted in an initial 90/60 split in seats between the ruling party and opposition in the 150 seat

parliament. For various reasons the total number since has decreased to 141 MPs, and so has the total number of parties represented. The number generally does change quite often.

The results may have been more favourable for the opposition had key decisions have been made differently, but compared to some previous Georgian parliaments – most notably those of the Saakashvili-era – this parliament retains a significant opposition contingent.

Background

It's important to note that the 2016 Parliament consisted of three parties with 77 MPs elected through proportional representation system with a single nationwide constituency with an electoral threshold of 5%. Another 73 seats were elected through single-member constituencies with the winner required to gain over 50% of the vote to avoid a run-off. As a result, four years after coming to power, GD garnered 115 seats out of 150 having won just 49% of the vote.

The opposition tried and failed to have GD pass the electoral bill they had been promised in June 2019, but they still managed to achieve an improved system in March 2020. The new electoral law stipulated that: 120 deputies would be elected through proportional representation, while another 30 would be elected through single-member constituencies. This was a massive step up from the 2016 system in terms of levelling the playing field. A fully proportional system was favourable for small or new parties, while a single-member constituency system had traditionally been favourable for ruling parties.

This reform was a game-changer of sorts. Parties were largely happy with the outcome and focused on their campaigns. Parties with means began investing large sums of money. Some used [creative approaches](#) and employed [digital adverts](#) for the first time. The mood was good, there was a sense of momentum, and expectations

were high. However, due to the polarizing nature of Georgian politics, the two largest parties received 75% of the vote between them. The seven remaining parties that won seats received a total of 18% combined, with the largest of this group receiving just 3.79% of the vote. Those results were highly disappointing for most parties, particularly as the ambition was to force a coalition government.

The road to the 2024 election

Today, this momentum seems lost. But more than that, the electoral system is going to change again for the 2024 elections, which will present further complications for the opposition.

In terms of the opposition, the United National Movement (UNM) remains the largest opposition party in the parliament. Although the UNM gained nine seats in the 2020 elections compared to the previous 2016 parliamentary elections and have followed up that result with more success in the 2021 municipal elections – gaining nearly 31% of the vote nationwide – the party now finds itself at a crossroads. Party's now former leader Nika Melia lost to Levan Khabeishvili in recent intra-party elections. Melia's critics claim he has failed to adequately respond to the challenges that the party has been facing, including a lack of success in securing the release of former President Mikheil Saakashvili from prison. Despite this, it does not appear that the main challenger came from the Saakashvili camp of friends and family. Instead, another group rumoured to be

acting under the influence of the former Defence Minister and by some accounts billionaire Davit Kezerashvili, as well as former Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Vano Merabishvili have thrown down the gauntlet and backed Levan Khabeishvili. Intra-party elections are finished, but the story of UNM's immediate future is still unfolding. However, even if 18 months is a long time in Georgian politics, as things stand, UNM would struggle to hold onto its gains from the previous elections.

None of the seven other opposition parties winners of seats in 2020 elections – European Georgia, Lelo, Strategy Builder, Girchi, European Socialists (formerly Alliance of Patriots), Citizens and Labour – have gained any significant traction since the 2020 elections. The contrary may even be true. Some are naturally too small and have limited financial or media resources. Others have jeopardized their identities for the sake of attempted political shortcuts that led to nowhere.

To give just one example, Strategy Builder originally ran its platform in tandem with the Law and Justice Party, but has since broken from that alliance. Its leader Giorgi Vashadze recently left Parliament to join forces with Droa and Girchi More Freedom. Both of those parties were created in the aftermath of the 2020 elections. At the same time, not all Strategy Builder MPs have followed their leader out of Parliament. Teona Akubardia has stayed and has effectively quit the

party. Whether this new alliance will be long term or if it will have new headliner additions remains to be seen, but more importantly, can the average voter keep up with all this?

Ideologically, there is little connecting many of the opposition parties, primarily because there is no specific ideology they stand on. Girchi, Georgia's libertarian party, may be an exception, but even that didn't prevent the party from fracturing into Girchi and Girchi More Freedom.

The electoral system

With 2024 elections looming over political parties, alliances like the one between Strategy Builder, Droa and Girchi More Freedom suggest that, on one hand, they are aware of their limited chances of overcoming the 5% barrier on their own. But, on the other hand, this also perhaps demonstrates that they have given up on the hope that Georgian Dream will lower the threshold through constitutional amendments as was promised in the past, notably in the Charles Michel agreement in April 2021. It was item number one on the “Ambitious electoral reform” section of the agreement: “All future parliamentary elections shall be fully proportional. The next two parliamentary elections shall have a threshold between natural and 2%”.

The EU expects Georgia to fulfil the [EU's 12-Point Recommendations](#) – the homework the country received after it's failed EU candidacy bid, but sadly, the document fails to mention the threshold specifically. It only

recommends the vague point of “further improving the electoral framework” and, thus, the issue has since disappeared from the radar.

The opposition’s fears that this reform will not pass are far from groundless. The ruling party has a track record of pulling the rug on agreements, specifically on electoral reform. They [abandoned the hard-fought agreement](#) in 2019, then again after [withdrawing from the Charles Michel agreement](#) in 2021. Later, the administration as represented by party chair Irakli Kobakhidze quite bluntly said that it has ‘[no obligation](#)’ to make the amendments. In July 2022 after the failed EU candidacy bid Kobakhidze tried to package the electoral reform into a form of a blackmail to the EU, saying that “no later than a month” after Georgia receives European Union candidate status in December, Parliament will approve a lower two-percent threshold for parliamentary elections. That December 2022 deadline has since moved to next year. However, the logic was simple. Either they connect the reform to something unrealistic like EU candidacy at a point when the ship had practically sailed and blame the lack of reforms on the EU, or, in the case of unexpected success, they pass the reform. In that case, they would be the party that had delivered the candidate status to the country and therefore gain politically. The threshold would then not present such a political risk for the party. This is of course quite cynical, but politically savvy logic. Some may say those two things often go hand in hand.

Having said all this, overanalysing every quote coming out of Georgian politicians can still be misleading. Politicians often say things to defuse tension or procrastinate on a matter and buy some time. In the end that is how most of these promises were made in the first place. For example, [in an interview in November](#), Kobakhidze said “We have made a public statement that this issue [lowering the threshold] will not be discussed this year. We will return to discussions in 2024. The main prerequisite here is a reduction of radicalism in our country, which has been the main line of the opposition. If radicalism is decreased and if we see the opposite trend, then of course our motivation to lower the threshold will be higher”.

But there is also good news, at least on paper. In September 2021, Parliament managed to pass a bipartisan electoral reform bill at first reading. Through its amendments, if adopted at the third reading, the threshold will decrease to 2% from 5% for the next two parliamentary elections. This didn’t receive enough attention at the time, perhaps because the parties knew that the political will wasn’t there to actively pursue it further and get the bill through the readings and adopted. If the threshold is not lowered, the Georgian opposition and therefore large sections of the public will remain underrepresented in parliament come 2024, which will be a big downgrade even from the 2020 Parliament’s semi-functional state. The opposition has had a hard time uniting over any cause up until now, but if the parties can genuinely unite around one thing and

one thing alone, it should be lowering the threshold. It is of nearly existential importance for more than a half of these parties, if not all.

A recent IRI poll released on November 7 asked the public who they would vote for if parliamentary elections were held now. Twenty-five percent named Georgian Dream and 12% the United National Movement with all other parties polling under 3%. Many respondents cited lack of good options and struggled to name a party, but recent elections show that such voters often end up backing the big party in the end – such has always been the polarizing nature of Georgian elections. The same poll showed that 33% of voters said they would not vote for the UNM under any circumstances, while 30% said the same for the Georgian Dream. Eighteen percent had the same reaction to the Patriots’ Alliance, 15% to the newly formed Conservative Movement, 14% to European Georgia, and 12% to Girchi-More Freedom.

It is in the best interest of the parliamentary opposition as well as non-parliamentary opposition to genuinely and persistently push for a lowering of the threshold and do whatever it takes to achieve it.

Lowering the threshold is also in the interest of GD and UNM in the end. They both have a number of polarizing figures in their ranks that many have a problem voting for, even among their traditional supporters. Without reform, nihilism and frustration could lead to low turnout, which could backfire on them as well. The two big

parties should also not be in favour of choking off the opposition entirely, especially the more constructive and collaborative opposition MPs. “We are willing to lower the barrier, precisely for this reason, so that our political spectrum is not limited to two political parties” – said Kobakhidze in November.

GD also needs to be secure from another possible UNM boycott. The UNM will have greater leverage over GD if they are the only party – they could walk out of Parliament, once again calling into question the institution’s legitimacy. For all its flaws, the 2020 Parliament is still a space in which GD have collaborated with Citizens, Girchi, European Socialists, Strategy Builder, Lelo, Independents and others. That was a source of legitimacy that ended the 2021 boycott to a degree, even prior to the Charles Michel agreement and despite GD’s withdrawal from it.

Another thing that yields hope that GD could allow a lower threshold is the fact that GD has been flirting – or more than flirting some would say – with ideologically conservative proxy parties. Or at least one. There is always demand for that, more so now than before with tensions high over the war in Ukraine and the world coming out of a pandemic. Creating a proxy party could also suggest potential readiness for elections with a lower threshold to help such a party gain a foothold in parliament. Even without proxy allies, if push came to shove, GD would be able to form a coalition today, offer alliances to opposition parties in

exchange for political concessions – a practice that is common in many European countries with coalition governments.

This last option could be a reason for the GD leadership to consider a lower threshold. With some bravery and pressure from the opposition, GD could be persuaded to find the political will to make the right decision. GD is still comfortably the single most popular party, and some inter-alliance competition could make them healthier and benefit the country◆

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