

POST-ELECTION CRISIS IN GEORGIA DEEPENS AS TBILISI HEADS INTO 2025

Country ‘elects’ new President as the pro-EU opposition continues to reject the results of the parliamentary election

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SUMMARY

Georgia is bracing itself for a protracted post-election crisis after pro-EU opposition parties rejected the results of the 26th October parliamentary election, citing allegations of large-scale election fraud, voter intimidation and Russian interference.

Mass protests against the government have accelerated after the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party of billionaire ex-PM Bidzina Ivanishvili announced that it will “suspend” the country’s EU integration until 2028. The ruling bloc has also denounced the protests as an attempt to destabilize the country, moved to detain prominent opposition leader Nika Gvaramia, and forcibly cracked down on protesters. In response to the police crackdown, the US and the UK moved to sanction several Georgian officials. While the EU aimed to do the same, it was prevented from doing so after Hungary and Slovakia issued a veto.

The crisis has deepened after Georgian Dream ally Mikheil Kavelashvili, an ex-ruling party MP known for his anti-Western stances, was elected President by a government-controlled electoral college and is on course to be sworn in as head of state by the end of the year. Meanwhile, outgoing President Salome Zurbishvili, who has emerged as the informal leader of the pro-EU opposition, continues to call for a re-run election.

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 increasingly polarized political environment, Georgian authorities may respond even more forcibly to forthcoming protests but also on the democratic opposition, while alleged Russian interference remains a concern.

 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.

COUNTRY ELECTS NEW PRESIDENT

On 14th December, Georgia's Presidential Electoral College elected Mikheil Kavelashvili as the new head of state. Following a constitutional amendment in 2017, this was the first presidential election in which the head of state was elected by a designated college of electors (MPs and local government representatives) instead of via a popular vote. Of the 300 electors, 225 were present and 224 voted for Kavelashvili, the only candidate for the position.

A ruling party MP and former professional football player, Kavelashvili, who served two consecutive terms in the Georgian parliament, was nominated by the ruling Georgian Dream party (GD) of billionaire ex-Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. Known for his anti-Western views, Kavelashvili founded the People's Power party in 2022 but has remained an ally of the ruling GD. He is expected to be inaugurated on 29th December.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION FOLLOWING POST-ELECTION TURMOIL

Georgia's indirect presidential election was held seven weeks after the ruling GD scored a decisive but domestically and internationally contested victory in the parliamentary election on 26th October. GD, which has been in power since 2012, secured 54% of the popular vote against 37.6% garnered by four pro-EU coalitions, which aimed to end 12 years of GD rule. These opposition formations 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 the Strong Georgia alliance of Mamuka Kazharadze and the For Georgia party of former GD-nominated Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia.

Following widespread allegations of large-scale voter fraud, voter intimidation and Russian interference, the pro-EU opposition unanimously rejected the results of the parliamentary election and decided not to take up their seats in parliament, with a series of large-scale mass protests having followed. Supported by (outgoing) Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili, who has since become the informal leader of the pro-EU opposition, protesters have been demanding investigations into voter fraud and a re-run parliamentary election. Mass protests have accelerated after the ruling GD announced it will “suspend” the country's EU integration until 2028. In turn, the ruling bloc has denounced the protests as an attempt to destabilize the country, moved to detain prominent opposition leader Nika Gvaramia and cracked down on the protests with force. In response to the police crackdown, the US and the UK moved to sanction several Georgian officials. While the EU aimed to move the same, Hungary and Slovakia blocked these punitive measures.

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 obvious end in sight. The four pro-EU opposition blocs stand united and continue to protest the October parliamentary election. Outgoing President Zurbishvili has emphasized that only a re-run parliamentary election can provide a way out of the crisis and has expressed her readiness to meet Ivanishvili. However, the government insists that the elections were conducted “successfully” and refuses to hold snap elections.

Meanwhile, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze has hinted at imprisoning Zurabishvili after her mandate expires, while parliament continues to lack actual opposition parties.

Lasting protests may be followed by an extended police crackdown. Based on the experience of a series of anti-government protests held in Georgia over the last four years, the country's government-controlled authorities may crack down even further on any upcoming demonstration, particularly in the case of a lasting and large-scale protest movement. In the long run, the government could also move against the opposition if the protest movement is seen as a threat to GD's rule. Notably, PM 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 mediation. Held in 2020, the last parliamentary election, in which GD secured an overwhelming but disputed victory, also led to a major 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).

POLITICAL & POLICY IMPLICATIONS


In the case of a protracted crisis, Georgia's EU membership bid will most likely fade away. 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. It is difficult to see how this scenario can be averted unless the government and opposition manage to reach a political settlement, which currently seems unlikely.

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.

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If you would like to schedule a discussion of this paper, please contact:

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