

# THE STATE OF GEORGIA'S DEMOCRACY:

## At the crossroads of decline and opportunity

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### INTRODUCTION

Georgian democracy is passing through turbulent times. Political parties have been unable to compromise following the post-election **political crisis**. The opposition is largely united under the idea that the snap elections and releasing Giorgi Rurua and Nika Melia, who they consider to be political prisoners, as the only way out of the crisis. At the same time, the Georgian Dream does not consider Nika Melia or Giorgi Rurua as political prisoners or see a need for snap elections. Georgian parties have been unable to address the crisis themselves over the last 5 months, and the **EU stepped in to mediate**, though without success. Following the failed dialogue, leading members of European Parliament **expressed** their disappointment with the parties' inability to achieve results through political dialogue, and stated that Georgia's leaders should not expect a return to business as usual from the European Union. The ongoing political crisis led the **Washington Post** as well as the **US Senate** to question whether Georgia could or would further develop democratically.

In this context, the main question is what does Georgian democracy look like now and where is it headed? To address those questions, this essay explores three factors: Georgia's performance in international indexes, the Georgian public's views of democracy, and the international geopolitical context Georgia finds itself in.

### GEORGIAN DEMOCRACY DOWNGRADED IN GLOBAL INDEXES

Georgian democracy has been declining for at least two years, according to the international indexes which attempt to measure different components of democracy.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) **2021 report**, democratic performance in Georgia worsened in 2020. While Georgia was ranked 89th on the EIU's index in 2019, Georgia is now 91st globally. Georgia's scores declined from 5.93 out of 10 points in 2017 to 5.31 points in 2020. These results place Georgia in 19th place out of 28 countries in Eastern Europe. The *Functioning of Government* (3.57) and *the Political Culture* (3.75) sub-indexes received the lowest scores among the five categories which the index assessed.

Georgia's scores in the **2021 Freedom House** report declined by one point to 60 out of a potential 100 points. The decline was in the Electoral Process category, and stemmed from shortcomings in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

The **2020 report** showed a larger loss in freedom scores, with a two point decline. The score changes occurred in two categories: *Political Pluralism* and *Associational and Organizational Rights*. The decline in pluralism resulted from the filing of criminal charges against an opposition figure two weeks after he announced plans to establish a new

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political party. The changes in Associational and Organizational Rights scores stemmed from the police's use of excessive force to disperse protesters outside Parliament.

The Bertelsmann Transformation Index **evaluated** Georgia as a *Defective Democracy* in 2021, with Georgia scoring 56 points (unchanged from 2019). This puts it in the 45<sup>th</sup> place out of 180 countries. Consequently, Georgia is in a similar score range as Poland and Saint Lucia. According to the **report**, Georgia still needs to regain its *anti-corruption* momentum which has been on the decline since 2018.

Georgia's overall performance in terms of democratic development has declined in two of three major international indexes this year. While this presents an international perspective on Georgia's democratic development, what do Georgians think?

## **PUBLIC OPINION ON GEORGIA'S DEMOCRACY**

Public opinion polls show that trust in institutions increased significantly in the last year. Yet, this is against a backdrop of relatively low trust in many institutions. At the same time, the numbers should be interpreted with the country's two ongoing crises in mind: the post-election crisis and the pandemic.

Less than a half trust the institutions of government in Georgia. A quarter of the public (27%) distrust the **executive government**, while 40% trust it. Others are neutral, don't know, or refuse to answer the question. The picture is slightly different when it comes to trust in **Parliament**, where more people distrust the institution (32%), and relatively few trust it (25%). Similarly, 29% of respondents fully or

rather distrust the **court system**, while only 26% trust it.

Even though a minority trust these institutions, the data suggest trust has risen significantly since 2019. Trust in the **Executive Government** rose from 21% to 40%. Trust in the **courts** doubled from 13% to 26%. **Parliament** experienced a similar gain, from 15% to 25% trust.

The above changes are in the context of the ongoing pandemic. At the end of 2020, 61% of the public **evaluated** the government's handling of the pandemic as good or very good. Approval increased slightly according to recent polls from **2021** as well.

The data also suggest society wants inclusive political dialogue and pluralism in the legislature. A large majority of respondents (82%) agree that, "It is important for all political parties to collaborate with each other." Furthermore, 76% **think** that, "It is important that all elected political parties participate in the parliament."

In the above context, the Georgian public became slightly more positive about democracy in 2020. In **2019**, 49% of the respondents thought that "Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government," and in December **2020** 58% did.

With this domestic context in mind, it is important to also consider what lays outside Georgia's borders and how this relates to Georgia's democratic development.

## INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN TROUBLE AND TRANSATLANTIC UNITY ON ITS WAY

Georgia's ongoing political crisis is sometimes mentioned in the context of other challenges to democracy in the region. Georgia's immediate neighbors are hybrid or authoritarian regimes like Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey. In this regard, Russia's presence in the region has only grown in the last year, given its role in settling the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

Simultaneously, the West has invested heavily in Georgia's democracy. Washington is usually considered as a "guarantor" of not only democracy promotion in Georgia, but also as the main strategic provider of military and non-military assistance. The conditionality of the EU and the US's role as a strategic partner have supported reforms over the years. In this vein, some see the ongoing political crisis as a first foreign policy challenge for the Biden administration or as a test for the EU.

In light of the current political crisis, a recent editorial went so far as to say that "The West just lost Georgia", insisting that Georgia is taking a sharp turn away from its declared aspirations to become a member of the Euro-Atlantic community. Despite this, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, recently suggested before the US Senate that Georgia was not turning away from the West. Moreover, public opinion polls demonstrate that widespread support for Georgia's membership in NATO (71%) and the EU (73%).

In the above context, the pressure that is expected from the Biden administration might be an opportunity to breath new life into Georgia's currently flawed democratization.

## CONCLUSION

Georgia's democracy as measured by international index shows declines, suggesting a need for reform. These declines though are not dramatic, meaning that there is room for renewal. Indeed, public support for democracy has grown over the last year. However, despite the fact that trust in core state institutions rose in 2020, the functioning of government is the most flawed component of governance in Georgia according to the EIU index. This is in a less than hospitable neighborhood, making reform all the more challenging. In the context of the ongoing political crisis, western actors have widely expressed doubts about Georgia's democracy, though pressure from the West may yet support the country's democratization moving forward.

*This essay was written by Nino Samkharadze, a Junior Policy Analyst at the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP). It was written within the Framework of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Essay Competition on The State of Democracy in the South Caucasus. The views presented in this text reflect the views of the author alone, and do not reflect the views of CRRC Georgia, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, or any related entity.*