

Georgia Program Summary

Following what is now called the Rose Revolution, on January 4, 2004, Mikheil Saakashvili, leader of the National Movement – United Democrats coalition, was elected President of Georgia by an overwhelming majority. He won on the promises of attacking corruption, improving the economic situation and restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity.

In January 2008, Georgia held early presidential elections, precipitated by the civil unrest of the previous November. President Saakashvili succeeded in winning a new term. This was followed by early parliamentary elections, which were held in May, 2008. The ruling United National Movement won nearly 60 percent of the proportional vote and 71 of 75 majoritarian seats, giving them a constitutional majority. Members of the nine-party United Opposition and the Labor Party refused to take up their mandates, leaving only the newly formed Christian-Democrats in opposition.

On August 7, 2008, Georgian ground forces entered the breakaway province of South Ossetia following several days of border skirmishes with Ossetian militias. This prompted an invasion by Russian forces which had been waiting across the northern border. In the end, Georgian forces were pushed back and the territories were overtaken by Russian troops. Following the conflict, Abkhazia and South Ossetia declared their respective independence.

One of the crucial elements in furthering democracy building in Georgia is creating and maintaining well-organized and stable political parties. After the “Rose Revolution,” all major political parties that did not enter the new government lost credibility with the electorate and needed to re-build their organizations from the ground up. The International Republican Institute (IRI) has been working steadily since 1998 to strengthen the internal party structures of all parties, be they government, parliamentary opposition or non-parliamentary opposition. Following presidential elections in January 2008, IRI began working with several new or resurgent parties to help them build their structures and compete in the May 2008 parliamentary elections. Since the end of the 2008 election cycle, IRI has held trainings for both leadership and functionaries from nearly all major political parties in Georgia. IRI has also assisted several major parties in establishing strong women’s chapters to advocate for women’s issues within the party structure and the government. IRI also has a long-standing relationship with major youth organizations and party youth organizations in Georgia, which it uses to train young party activists in everything from political campaign techniques and management skills, to election observation. This nation-wide network of young political and civil society activists provides the backbone for future party development.

Since May 2003, IRI has conducted nationwide polling and focus groups with the express aim of informing the development of party platforms and ideologies based on the issues which are closest to the electorate.

In September 2008, IRI started a new governance program in the regions which aims to increase the capacity of regional and municipal elected officials to effectively manage their mandates, increase local government transparency, and communicate with their constituents with a greater degree of autonomy from Tbilisi.