

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Georgia's October 2024 parliamentary elections occurred during a defining moment of historic regional instability and domestic political tension, offering both a reflection of the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and of growing public frustration over the deterioration of fundamental freedoms. Against this backdrop, the elections nonetheless presented an opportunity for citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to elect government leaders who share a similar vision for Georgia's future. **However, a legal framework and regulatory practices that hindered genuine electoral competition, misuse of public resources by the ruling government, the targeting of civil society, obstruction of opposition parties, systematic voter intimidation, and lack of public confidence and trust in institutions contributed to an election that was fundamentally flawed.**

Leading up to the election, the government took unprecedented steps to amend the legal and regulatory framework including enactment of the controversial *Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence* also known as the "Foreign Agent Law" in early June 2024. Strong public criticism over its enactment and subsequent persecution of civil society groups by government authorities had a dramatic effect on freedom of association and expression, raising concerns of democratic backsliding and triggering large scale public protests. **Overall, the mission observed significant irregularities in the electoral process, highlighting four primary areas of concern: inequitable conditions and misuse of state resources; suppression of civil society and opposition parties; systematic voter intimidation; state capture of electoral and judicial institutions; and rejection of the results.**

- 1. Inequitable Conditions and Misuse of State Resources.** The transfer of political party donation and campaign financing regulation from the State Audit Office (SAO) to the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), whose head the Prime Minister appointed, led to a climate of fear that the ACB would be weaponized against opposition unions. Amendments to the Law on Political Union of Citizens (LPU), which did not allow parties to receive donations from legal entities or to form pre-election blocs, forced candidates to abandon their own party to join a unified list. Given a threshold of one percent of votes to obtain public political party financing, these changes created a disincentive for smaller parties to unite and compete to win seats. Interpretations of broadcast media regulations, including prohibiting media outlets from offering free airtime for political advertisements to all parties and limiting the formula for distributing free airtime, restricted opposition political parties' ability to engage with and reach voters. Commanding a significant funding advantage, Georgian Dream exerted influence over several media outlets to dominate the political narrative. Georgian Dream also used state funded events to promote parliamentary candidates and mobilized public servants and socio-economic vulnerable groups to attend its rallies, creating undue pressures on public servants to participate in partisan activities. The ruling party also allegedly launched a widespread campaign to collect profiling data on citizens, reportedly using government resources, in violation of voters' privacy. These government actions created an uneven playing field, compromising the fairness of the election.
- 2. Suppression of Civil Society and Opposition Parties, and Systematic Voter Intimidation.** The campaign period was peaceful, but there was widespread and systematic political intimidation and coercion, particularly in rural and ethnic-minority areas. A lack of effective institutional safeguards compromised civil society, opposition parties and citizens' ability to freely exercise their right to freedom of speech and assembly. Intimidation tactics, such as coercively acquiring voter identity cards, escalated as election day approached. While election day proceeded without major technical issues, the presence of video cameras in polling stations and the use of special pens that compromised ballot secrecy exacerbated fears of voter intimidation. These factors eroded confidence in the electoral process and the protection of fundamental political rights.

- 3. State Capture of Electoral and Judicial Institutions.** Public perception of the independence of the electoral commission declined due to changes in the Central Election Commission (CEC), such as removing the opposition-nominated deputy chairperson and lowering internal voting thresholds, which heightened concerns about partisanship. Additionally, a controversial CEC decree assigning poll workers a week before the election, upheld by the courts, drew strong criticism for allowing potential ruling party influence. While electronic and manual vote counts performed as expected vulnerabilities in the voting process remained unaddressed. Inadequate responses from investigative authorities, a biased judiciary, and insufficient mechanisms for resolving election disputes further undermined trust in the process and contributed to the rejection of election results.
- 4. Rejection of Election Results.** The pre-election period and election day were characterized by widespread irregularities, undermining the credibility of the process. Observations highlighted a range of sophisticated tactics aimed at coercing voters and manipulating the outcome. This included an insidious whisper campaign involving capturing voters' data profiles to apply pressure, surveil voters, and compromise the perceived secrecy of the vote. This was compounded by election day malpractices which included coordinated efforts of voter surveillance, coercion, vote buying, carousel voting, breaches of ballot secrecy, interference with inking procedures, and obstruction of domestic observers. Ineffective dispute resolution mechanisms further exacerbated tensions, leading to sustained instability following election day. The democratic principle of citizens accepting election results is fundamental to the stability and legitimacy of any democracy but requires trust in institutions and the electoral process. Lack of broad public trust and acceptance of results raises questions about the legitimacy of the election outcomes.

The parliamentary elections revealed a decline of genuine political competition. The IRI mission found that numerous factors heavily marred the process and cast serious doubts on the election's credibility. The observations of the IRI mission underscore an urgent need for coherent and comprehensive election reforms to address weaknesses in the legal, administrative, and institutional framework governing elections.

**The IRI mission echoes the international community's interest in, and enthusiasm for, credible, inclusive and transparent elections in Georgia. The IRI mission encourages the government of Georgia to heed the calls of civil society and the international community to address questions of government legitimacy emerging from the elections. In the longer term, Georgia must prioritize reforms that enhance the independence of the election administration, law enforcement bodies, judiciary, and media, while fostering a more inclusive and open political environment. Addressing these challenges will be vital to advance Georgia's democratic progress, its aspirations for closer integration with Europe and, ultimately, to ensure elections are a genuine reflection of peoples' will.**

To this end, this report is offered by the IRI international election observation mission to Georgia's October 26, 2024, parliamentary election. The report presents an impartial and objective assessment of the electoral process; provides actionable recommendations to enhance the administrative, legal, and regulatory environments; and documents the activities of entities who may seek to interfere in electoral processes or discredit credible civil society organizations providing essential oversight of those processes.