

Commentary: Georgia After the Presidential Elections

Aleksandre Kvakhadze*

On 28 November 2018 the second round of the presidential election finalized the almost three-month-long electoral marathon in Georgia. According to the official results, Zalome Zurabishvili, supported by the ruling party Georgian Dream (GD), became the first female president not only in Georgia, but in the entire Caucasus region. At the same time, the opposition candidate was enabled to reach the second round of presidential elections for the first time in Georgia's history. At this juncture, this paper aims to overview the pre-election campaign, elucidate the statistics, and discuss future trends in Georgian domestic politics.

Key words: Georgia, Elections, Zalome Zurabishvili, Georgian Dream



* Aleksandre Kvakhadze, Research Fellow at Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Georgia).

Introduction

The second round of voting in Georgia's presidential election, held on 28 November 2018, concluded a marathon election process spanning almost three months. According to the official results released by Election Administration of Georgia (CEC), the government-supported, formally independent candidate Salome Zurbishvili was elected as the first women president of the country with 59.52% of the votes cast. Her rival, Mikheil Saakashvili's ally Grigol Vashadze, received 40.48% of the vote.¹ Despite the reduction of presidential power according to the new edition of the constitution, the 2018 presidential election was among the most hectic and turbulent in Georgia's recent history.² The recent election can be considered as a repetition of the 2020 General Election. It is noteworthy that Salome Zurbishvili is the last president to be elected by popular vote. This paper aims to present an overview of the pre-election campaign, elucidate the statistics, and discuss future trends in Georgian domestic politics.

Candidates and statistics

Perhaps the most exciting fact is that the first three most popular presidential candidates have served as Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Georgia.³ The election winner was French-born Salome Zurbishvili – a descendant of Georgian political emigrants who fled Georgia after the establishment of Soviet rule in 1921. Prior to her appointment as a Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia by President Mikheil Saakashvili in 2004, Zurbishvili had held office in French diplomatic missions, including as an ambassador of France to Georgia. She was participating in the negotiations around the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Akhalkalaki and Batumi. However, following her resignation she joined the opposition. In 2016 she was elected as an independent majoritarian member of parliament for Mtatsminda electoral district.⁴

1 Election Administration of Georgia (2018). Available at: <http://results.cec.gov.ge/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

2 GIP (2018) 'The Last President Elected by People? A Review of the 2018 Presidential Elections'. 10 September. Available at: <http://gip.ge/the-last-president-elected-by-people-a-review-of-the-2018-presidential-elections/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

3 Rezonansi (2018) 'Am Saprezidento Arcevebshi Sami Sagareo Sakmeta Ministri Miigebis Monatsileobas' [Three Former Ministers of Foreign Affairs Will Participate in this Elections]. 27 July. Available at: http://www.resonancedaily.com/index.php?id_rub=4&id_artc=52630 (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

4 Kavkazskiy Uzel (2018). Zurbishvili Salome. 21 November. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/73184/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

Zurabishvili's rival, Grigol Vashadze, was representing the coalition of opposition parties "Civil Movement – Unity is Power" (United Opposition), which comprised the Saakashvili-led United National Movement (UNM) with several other minor parties and civic organizations. Vashadze, who managed to gain approximately 40% of votes in the second round, previously had a career in Soviet diplomacy, in the department of Space and Nuclear Power.⁵ Following the demise of the Soviet State, he ran business companies. In 2008 he was appointed as Minister of Culture and, later, as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Vashadze played a key role in pursuing the policy of non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the Russo–Georgian war of 2008. In the 2017 local elections, Vashadze was a mayor candidate for the UNM in Kutaisi, but he managed to gain only 27% of the vote.⁶

The third candidate, David Bakradze, took on the office of Foreign Minister in 2008. He was nominated by European Georgia (EG), the party that separated from UNM following the 2016 general elections. Previously, Bakradze was the presidential candidate for the UNM in 2013, when he received approximately 20% of the vote.

Among other candidates were Zurab Japaridze, representing the extravagant pro-Marijuana legalization party "Girchi"; Shalva Natelashvili from the Labour Party; and the former Speaker of the Parliament, David Usupashvili. However, none of these candidates received more than 4% of the votes cast.

The results of the first round took the ruling party by surprise. Salome Zurabishvili gained 615,572 (38,64%), whereas her rival Vashadze received 601,224 votes (37.74%). The difference, less than 1%, was not a comfortable result for the government party. Third place was taken by David Bakradze, who gained 10.97% (174,849 votes).⁷ In the first round, Grigol Vashadze was leading in all of Georgia's major cities, such as Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Rustavi, and Poti; and in regions like Samegrelo, the lowlands of Imereti, Kakheti, Shida Kartli, and the Azerbaijani-populated settlements of Kvemo Kartli. Zurabishvili, on the other hand, was

5 Kavkazskiy Uzel (2018). Vashadze Grigol. 21 November. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/328032/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

6 Radio Tavisupleba (2018) 'Salome Zurabishvili VS Grigol Vashadze'. 14 November. Available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/ასალომე-ზურაბიშვილი-vs-გრიგოლ-ვაშაძე-/29600309.html> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

7 Election Administration of Georgia (2018). Available at: <https://results20181028.cec.gov.ge/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

relying on the central districts of Tbilisi (Vake, Saburtalo, Mtatsminda), Guria, remote regions such as Samtskhe-Javakheti, the mountainous part of Imereti, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Racha-Lechkhumi-Kvemo Svaneti region, and mountainous Adjara.

In the second round, the situation changed dramatically. On the one hand, Grigol Vashadze, through the incorporation of Bakradze's votes (approximately 170 thousand), gained approximately 780,000 votes. On the other hand, the number of Zurabishvili's voters increased by almost half a million. As a result, in the second round, Zurabishvili gained approximately 1,100,000 votes (49.52%) and won in all municipalities except Rustavi and Telavi.⁸

Electoral campaign

The major feature of the campaign was the heavy reliance of both candidates on negative campaigning. The United Opposition focused on Salome Zurabishvili's rhetoric, in which she accused Georgia of starting the war of 2008.⁹ Zurabishvili was also labeled

The major feature of the campaign was the heavy reliance of both candidates on negative campaigning.

the "cannabis queen" due to her support of marijuana legalization.¹⁰ Throughout the whole campaign the former president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, was hyperactive in his frequent appearances on TV and his personal Facebook page. Similar to previous elections, both sides attempted to discredit their rivals by releasing footage or documents. The opposition-supporting TV Rustavi 2 released a secret recording of a conversation between Georgian businessman Zaza Okuashvili and high-ranking Georgian officials, which revealed a large-scale corruption deal.¹¹ Rustavi 2 also released an audio recording of a mid-level official, Mirza Subeliani, who was talking about how he assisted in the prosecution of several former

8 Election Administration of Georgia (2018). Available at: <http://results.cec.gov.ge/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

9 Civil.ge (2018) 'Sakartvelos Omis Datskebashi Dadanashaulebis Gamo Opozitsia Salome Zurabishvils Akritikebs' [The Opposition Criticises Salome Zurabishvili due to Accusing Georgia in Starting the August War]. 9 August. Available at: <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/248891> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

10 Netgazeti (2018) 'Kanapis Dedopali ar Var. Salome Zurabishvili Samgvdeloebis Pozitsias ar Iziares' [I am not a Cannabis Queen. Salome Zurabishvili Disagrees with the Clergy]. 20 September. Available at: <http://netgazeti.ge/news/305738/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

11 Transparency International (2018). 'A Secret Recording of a Conversation between Zaza Okuashvili and Levan Kipiani Points to a Possible Case of Corruption'. 19 September. Available at: <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/secret-recording-conversation-between-zaza-okuashvili-and-levan-kipiani-points-possible-case> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

ruling party officials through the torture of key witnesses.¹² In addition, Rustavi 2 released footage of the luxurious mansions belonging to high-ranking members of GD.¹³ A similar tactic was employed by the ruling party. Before the first round, the negative campaign of the ruling party was relatively passive and was solely focused on Grigol Vashadze's Soviet past. More precisely, due to his service in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he was accused of being a KGB agent and pro-Russian. Anonymous activists even wrote the word KGB at the candidate's regional offices.¹⁴ The situation changed dramatically after Zurabishvili's failure to win in the first round. There were several new attributes to the campaign. Firstly, the ruling party removed Salome Zurabishvili from most of its billboards and replaced her with Bidzina Ivanishvili and some other male leaders of GD.¹⁵ Apparently, Bidzina Ivanishvili took the initiative for this campaign. Secondly, GD reinforced the negative propaganda against the UNM party, and especially Misha Saakashvili. The campaigns "no to Misha" and "no to Natzi" (a pejorative term referring to the UNM) were widely circulated through social media and billboards.¹⁶ The pro-government TV station Imedi even announced an emergency pre-election regime in order to prevent the return of "the criminal regime of the United National Movement."¹⁷ According to the opposition, GD hired a well-known Israeli specialist in black PR technologies, Moshe Klughaft, who assisted GD to improve their campaign.¹⁸ Thirdly, GD received support from the Alliance of

Before the first round, the negative campaign of the ruling party was relatively passive and was solely focused on Grigol Vashadze's Soviet past. More precisely, due to his service in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he was accused of being a KGB agent and pro-Russian.

12 Radio Liberty (2018). 'Sex, Lies, and Audiotape: Just Another Election Campaign in Georgia'. 24 October. Available: <https://www.rferl.org/a/sex-lies-and-audiotape-presidential-election-campaign/29561804.html> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

13 Rustavi 2 (2018). 'Udzravi Koneba, romelits Otsnebis Tsevrebma 2012 Tslis Shemdeg Daagroves' [Real Estate of the members of "Dream", earned after 2012]. 13 September. Available at: <http://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/116029> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

14 1TV (2018). 'Rustavshi Grigol Vashadzis Sareklamo Banerze KGB Daatseres' [The Word KGN was Written in Grigol Vashadze's Banner in Rustavi]. 16 September. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/news/1llrustavshi-grigol-vashadzis-sareklamo-banerebi-witlad-sheghebes/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

15 PirveliRadio (2018). 'Bilbordebidan Gamkrali Zurabishvili' [Zurabishvili Dissappeared from the Billboards]. 15 November. Available at: <http://pirveliradio.ge/?newsid=116596> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

16 1TV (2018). 'Ara Mishas, ara Natsebs. Kutaisshi am Sloganit Aktzia Imartebe' [The Demonstration was Held in Kutaisi under the Slogan - No to Misha, no to Natsis]. 17 November. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/news/ara-mishas-ara-nacebs-qutaisshi-sloganit-actia-imartebe/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

17 Agenda (2018). 'TV Imedia Announces Emergency Pre-Election Regime'. 31 October. Available at: <http://agenda.ge/en/news/2018/2280> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

18 Jerusalem Post (2018). 'Israeli Strategists Sway Georgian Upset Elections Win'. 28 November. Available at: <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israeli-strategists-help-sway-Georgian-upset-election-win-573093> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

Patriots party, known for its pro-Russian and xenophobic rhetoric. This party even organized the rallies against Saakashvili in Tbilisi few days before elections.¹⁹ Fourthly, GD-associated media resources were stressing the assumption that Vashadze's victory would lead to instability and even civil war. A narrative of a Saakashvili-orchestrated revolution attempt was also prevalent.²⁰ Finally, Georgia's Prime Minister promised to write off bank debts for 600 thousand Georgian citizens.²¹

Assessing the elections

The oppositional spectrum of Georgia was dissatisfied with the results of the second round. During the opposition rallies held on 2 December, Grigol Vashadze described the election as a "criminal farce" and refused to recognize its legitimacy.²² The opposition

The opposition leaders accused the government of massive fraud by using methods such as so-called "Armenian carousels"

leaders accused the government of massive fraud by using methods such as so-called "Armenian carousels"²³ and printing fake IDs.²⁴ Furthermore, the opposition emphasized the intimidation of voters by the local authorities or security services, involvement of organized crime, and so-called "dzveli bichi,"²⁵ bribing voters with money or products (potatoes, onions) and distributing drugs among drug abusing people in exchange for votes.²⁶ The opposition also em-

19 1TV (2018). 'Patriotta Aliansis Aktsia Tavisuplebis Moedanze' [The Rallies Held by Alliance of Patriots in the Liberty Square]. 25 November. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/live/patriotta-aliansis-aqcia-tavisuplebis-moedanze/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

20 1TV (2018) 'Gedevan Popkhadze. Grigol Vashadze tu Archevnebs Moigebs es Samokalako Omis Datskebis Realuri Nabiji Ikneba' [Gedevan Popkhadze. Grigol Vashadze's Victory Could Lead to the Civil War]. 30 October. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/news/gedevan-fokhadze-grigol-vashadze-tu-archevnebs-moigebs-es-samoqalaqo-omis-dawyebis-realuri-nabiji-iqneba/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

21 OC Media (2018). 'PM Promises to Write off 1.5 Billion in Debts for 600,000 Georgians'. 19 November, Available at: <http://oc-media.org/pm-promises-to-write-off-1-5-billion-in-debts-for-600-000-georgians/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

22 Reuters (2018). 'Thousands of Georgians Protest Against Presidential Election Results'. 2 December. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-protest/thousands-in-georgia-protest-against-presidential-election-results-idUSKBN1O10KG> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

23 Armenian Carousel - an illicit method of controlling the voting process. The voter takes a ballot with an elected candidate outside the polling station and pass it to another voter, who enters the polling station, puts this ballot to the ballot box, but takes another ballot outside the polling station and so on.

24 <http://pirveliradio.ge/?newsid=117467>.

25 Dzveli Bichi - members of the crime groups, supporters of so-called thieves-in-law.

26 Rezonansi (2018). 'Otsnebam Archevnebshi ets Dveli Bichebi Charto' [Georgian Dream Included so-called Dzveli Bichi in the Electoral Process]. 28 October. Available at: http://resonancedaily.com/index.php?id_rub=4&id_artc=58850 (Accessed: 4 December 2018); Tabula (2018), 'ENM's Tsevis Gavrtsebuli Piradobebi Tsina Khelisuplebis Dros Gaukmda' [The ID cards Released by the Member of UNM have been Expired During Previous Administration]. 2 December. Available at: <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/140838-servisibis-saagento-enm-is-tsevis-gavrcelebuli-piradobebi-tsina-xelisuplebis-dros> (Accessed: 4 December 2018); GHN (2018). '2000 Laramde Valis Chamotsera da 5 kg Kartopilis

phasized the violence during the campaign, such as the wounding of the leader of the United Opposition in Oni municipality, Nodar Burdiladze, by a GD activist, as well as throwing a so-called Molotov cocktail at one activist's house.²⁷

The western reaction to the election was reserved. The matter of concern was the pre-election period. The US state department congratulated Salome Zurabishvili:

“We welcome the assessment by the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission that Georgia's presidential runoff was competitive and that candidates were able to campaign freely. We also share the Mission's concerns and those of other international and domestic observers about instances of misuse of state resources for partisan campaigning, among other issues. These actions are not consistent with Georgia's commitment to fully fair and transparent elections, and we urge Georgian authorities to address the shortcomings raised by OSCE/ODIHR and other observers.”²⁸

In a similar fashion, the misuse of administrative resources was the major concern of the OSCE mission in Georgia.

“In the campaign there were incidents of the misuse of administrative resources and the announcement of a series of social and financial initiatives, in particular debt relief for 600,000 individuals by a private financial institution linked to the chairperson of the ruling party.”²⁹

Regarding Russia's reaction, there were several statements by Russian officials, who were concerned about Vashadze's good performance in the first round.³⁰

The United Opposition achieved its highest vote since 2012. In

Darigeba Kanondargevevaa' [Writing off the Debts up to 2000 Lari and Distributing 5 Kg of Popatos is Illegal]. 20 November. Available at: <http://ghn.ge/com/news/view/215667/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

27 Netgazeti (2018). 'Onshi Dachrili Nodar Burdiladzis Mdgomareoba Stabilurad Mdzimea' [Health Condition of Wounded in Oni Nodar Burdiladze is Critical]. 23 November, Available at: <http://netgazeti.ge/news/323497/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018); RegInfo (2018) 'Rustavshi grigol Vashadzis Mkhhardamcheris Binashi Molotovis Kokteili Sheagdes' [The Molotov Cocktail Was Thrown to Grigol Vashadze's Supporters Apartment in Rustavi]. 26 November. Available at: <https://reginfo.ge/people/item/10959-rustavshi-grigol-vashawis-shtabis-xarmomadgenlis-binas-%E2%80%9Emolotovis-koqteili%E2%80%9C-esroles> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

28 US Department of State (2018). 'Georgia's 2018 Presidential Elections'. 30 November, Available at: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/11/287714.htm> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

29 International Election Observation Mission (2018). p. 1. Available at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

30 Rosiyskaya Gazeta (2018). 'Kosachev Prokomentiroval Itogi Vborov Prezidenta Gruzii'. 29 November. Available at: <https://rg.ru/2018/11/29/kosachev-prokomentiroval-itogi-vyborov-prezidenta-gruzii.html> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

the first round, Grigol Vashadze gained approximately 600 thousand votes, which is more than the approximately 500 thousand votes gained by the UNM in the 2016 general election, when the members of EG were still party members.³¹ Another important factor was the reconciliation between the former allies, UNM and ED. Although in pre-election campaign both parties attacked each other, as soon as the results of the exit polls of the first round were released, the presidential candidate from EG, David Bakradze, expressed unconditional support for the presidential candidate from United Opposition, Grigol Vashadze.³²

Post-election period

Despite the limited function of the president in Georgia, the ruling party used all of its resources to achieve a victory. The victory was a matter of prestige for Bidzina Ivanishvili and his party, and the ruling party was even forced to incorporate all pro-Russian political organizations.

Despite the limited function of the president in Georgia, the ruling party used all of its resources to achieve a victory.

On the other hand, the opposition refuses to recognize the result of the presidential elections and has organized protest rallies. The main demands are changing the electoral system from proportional-majoritarian to proportional or regional-proportional, along with early general elections.³³ The government has refused to negotiate with the opposition on this issue.³⁴ Nevertheless, the opposition realizes that it has about 800 thousand supporters, which in 2016 was enough for GD to gain the constitutional majority. Despite the unprecedented number of supporters, no UNM-associated official is represented either in central or in regional government. The UNM even does not have the head of a village. Such a misbalance of power, combined with the current socio-economic conditions,

31 Election Administration of Georgia (2018). Available at: <https://results20181028.cec.gov.ge/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018)

32 Civil.ge (2018). 'Bakradze Admits Defeat, Pledges Support to Vashadze'. 28 October, Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/262006> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

33 Liberali (2018). 'Grigol Vashadze: Gaertianebuli Opozitsia Movitkhovt Vadamdel Saparlameto Archevnebs' [Grigol Vashadze: The United Opposition Demands an Early General Elections]. 29 November. Available at: <http://liberali.ge/news/view/41552/grigol-vashadze-gaertianebuli-opozitsia-movitkhovt-vadamdel-saparlameto-archevnebs> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

34 ITV (2018) 'Eka Beselia: Sabednierod Chvens Gundshi Grigol Vashadzis Standartebisa da Gemovnebis Politikosebi ar Arian' [Eka Beselia: Hopefully, the Politicians Suitable for Grigol Vashadze's Political Style Do not Exist in our Team]. 3 December, Available at: <https://1tv.ge/news/eka-beselia-sabednierod-chvens-gundshi-grigol-vashadzis-standartebisa-da-gemovnebis-politikosebi-ar-arian/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

could create a new wave of protest in Georgia.

The opposition will most likely focus on changing the electoral system and early general elections. This offer is very attractive for the minor opposition parties, who have fewer chances to gain parliamentary seats in the existing electoral system. The existing electoral system theoretically allows a party to achieve a victory with a minority of overall votes but by winning the vast majority of majoritarian districts. For instance, in 2016 GD proportionally gained 48%, but won all 75 majoritarian districts and achieved a constitutional majority.³⁵ In addition, it is highly unlikely that GD will solve the economic crisis in Georgia, especially halting the devaluation of Georgia's national currency. All these factors could work in favor of the opposition.

The opposition will most likely focus on changing the electoral system and early general elections. This offer is very attractive for the minor opposition parties, who have fewer chances to gain parliamentary seats in the existing electoral system.

The ruling party, on the other hand, will try to maintain the status quo by holding elections in 2020 with the existing proportional-majoritarian system. Simultaneously, GD will continue informational warfare against the UNM and Mikheil Saakashvili with an emphasis on the “bloody nine years.”³⁶ The GD leadership, and especially Bidzina Ivanishvili, paid a high price for their victory, and in 2020 the stakes will likely be increased. We should also take into account that, unlike the presidential elections, all pro-Russian and conservative parties, such as the Alliance of Patriots, will participate in parliamentary elections as independent entities, which could divide the GD electorate.

Regarding Salome Zurbishvili, the limited functions of the president mean that she will never be able to make any tangible decisions at the domestic or international level. Taking into account her background, her influence will most likely be used by the ruling party to achieve rapprochement with the EU states, especially with France, of which is Bidzina Ivanishvili himself is a citizen.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the recent presidential elections were extremely tense and unpredictable. Forecasting the final results was extremely difficult. The UNM managed to fully recover after failure

³⁵ Election Administration of Georgia (2016). Available at: <http://results20161008.cec.gov.ge/> (Accessed: 4 December 2018).

³⁶ Bloody nine years - the phrase, used by GD supporters, referred to the years of Saakashvili's administration.

in the local elections in 2017 and currently represents a considerable number of voters. Such a good performance shows the potential for a further increase of votes for the next general election. The next few months will shed light on the long- and short-term trends in Georgia's domestic politics. For the ruling party, on the other hand, the presidential elections were extremely costly. Its dependence on administrative resources has increased significantly. One thing is clear: GD will need extraordinary efforts and resources to maintain its existing level of support in Georgian society.