



Georgian Dream Declares Itself the Winner of the Parliamentary Elections

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Following Saturday's parliamentary elections, Georgia finds itself in a serious political crisis. The ruling Georgian Dream party declared itself the winner, but international observers point to a number of irregularities and the pro-Western opposition and President Salome Zurbishvili will not recognise the results of the vote. Street protests called by the opposition are expected in the coming days. If the demonstrations are forcibly broken up, the EU and the U.S. will most likely impose further sanctions on Georgia.

What are the preliminary election results?

With more than 99% of the votes counted, the Central Election Commission of Georgia reported that 54% of voters chose the ruling Georgian Dream (GD). The pro-Western opposition (Coalition of Change, Unity-Save Georgia, Strong Georgia, For Georgia) received a total of 37.6% of the vote. These results mean that GD can count on 89 out of 150 seats, thus winning an absolute majority in parliament. The results coincide with an exit poll published by the pro-government TV station Imedi, but two other polls, presented by TV stations close to the opposition Formula and Mtavari Arkhi, yielded diametrically opposing results, with the opposition winning the election. As a result of the divergent exit polls, both GD and the pro-Western opposition declared victory.

How did international observers assess the elections?

International observers, in particular from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), considered the conduct of the elections as indicative of a decline in democratic standards in Georgia. In their view, the elections were characterised by unequal opportunities for candidates, polarisation, and antagonising rhetoric or even hate speech. They pointed to violence and repression against the opposition and independent media, pressure on voters (attempts to bribe public administration employees

or voters on voting day around polling stations, particularly in rural areas), the use of state resources by the party in power, and the taking of ID cards from individual voters, preventing them from voting. However, the observers did not explicitly state that the elections were rigged, noting the irregularities took place mainly in the pre-election period.

What has been the reaction of the Georgian opposition?

Leaders of the pro-Western opposition and President Salome Zurbishvili have stated that they do not recognise the official election results, which they believe were falsified. They have called on their supporters to participate in post-election protests. It is to be expected that, at least initially, they will be quite numerous and comparable to the spring protests over the law on so-called foreign agents. The opposition demanded the annulment of the voting results and the organisation of new elections to be conducted by an international electoral administration. In addition, politicians from all pro-Western parties announced that they would not take the parliamentary seats they had won. It is unlikely that the ruling party will decide to make any concessions to the opposition. However, developments will depend on whether the announced protests are peaceful and how the ruling camp responds to them. If it decides to pacify them by force, an aggravation of the political crisis can be expected.

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What has been Russia's reaction?

Russia has welcomed the official results of the Georgian elections. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declared that Russia did not interfere in any way in the elections, while blaming European countries for trying to influence and pressure Georgia. So far, no one from the Russian government has officially congratulated the leaders of Georgia's ruling party, although such congratulations have already been issued by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Hungary.

If the post-election situation in Georgia escalates and the opposition protests are so massive that they threaten to remove GD from power, informal Russian support for the Georgian ruling camp should be expected (e.g., disinformation activities, support in suppressing demonstrations by sending equipment, organising provocations near the so called borders with separatist Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Russia may try to threaten military intervention in Georgia to "protect" Russian citizens residing in the country, although at present it seems unlikely that Russia would decide to actually carry it out.

What has been the EU reaction?

Representatives of most EU Member States have expressed concern about the irregularities noted during the elections. The President of the European Council Charles Michel announced that EU heads of state and government would address the post-election situation in Georgia at their summit on 8 November. If the international observation missions, in their final findings, explicitly recognise that the elections were at least partially rigged, or post-election demonstrations by the opposition are forcibly broken up by the ruling camp, and the GD government's anti-EU course is maintained and increasingly strong, then EU sanctions against Georgia can be expected, such as the suspension of EU-Georgian cooperation in all spheres, individual sanctions against GD leaders, the temporary suspension of visa-free travel, and/or ultimately, the withdrawal of Georgia's status as an EU candidate and suspension of the European integration process. To deescalate post-election tensions in Georgia, the EU could consider offering mediation between the conflicting political camps, but it is difficult to expect GD to accept such a proposal.