



Crisis as a New Normal:

Lessons Learned from Georgia's Year of Troubles

Ghia Nodia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The decision of the opposition to boycott Parliament, alleging large-scale fraud in the October 2020 parliamentary elections, started one of the most severe political crises in Georgia's recent history. Although almost all opposition parties ended the boycott policy following an agreement mediated by the EU in April 2021, the situation is still far from being back to normal.

Georgia's hybrid political regime is characterized by a propensity for intermittent crises and political turmoil. However, the current stand-off has been especially damaging to Georgia's weak democratic institutions and may render greater damage still.

The most salient feature of the current crisis is the marginalization of Parliament as the key institution of democracy. As a result, the center of political life has evolved into negotiations between the ruling and opposition parties mediated by Western political players, alongside street protests, and, sometimes, hunger strikes.

The return, subsequent arrest, and fifty-day hunger strike of Mikheil Saakashvili – Georgia's former president and effective leader of the major opposition party, United National Movement (UNM) – contributed to further exacerbation of the crisis. However, it did not bring any qualitative change.

A deeper cause of the crisis is the refusal of the principal opponents to accept each other as legitimate political actors. Since coming to power in 2012, the Georgian Dream (GD) party has claimed that the UNM – the ruling party from 2004 to 2012 – is a criminal organization that has no moral right to stay in politics and must be forced out of the political scene. Furthermore, the GD has also attacked any actors critical of GD practices such as other opposition parties, civil society organizations, independent media, Western politicians and analysts, and even Georgia's Human Rights Defender, accusing them of being open or tacit accomplices to the UNM. On the other hand, a large part of the opposition and civil society considers GD as a secretly pro-Russian force subservient to President Putin's agenda.

There is a deep public mistrust towards the supposedly non-partisan institutions such as electoral administration and the judiciary. The opposition and many political analysts, as well as a large part of civil society see the Georgian state to be captured by the Georgian Dream party (GD), informally led by a billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Under these circumstances, an influential segment of the opposition and Georgian public believes that the incumbent government cannot be defeated in elections as the GD is likely to manipulate

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the process. This creates an expectation that the change may eventually come through large-scale street protests, reminiscent of 2003 in Georgia, 2004 and 2014 in Ukraine, or 2018 in Armenia. However, at this point, the Georgian public does not have an appetite for persistent large-scale protests.

The crisis has also led to a significant deterioration of relations between the Georgian government and its Western partners. While the GD maintains its declarative commitment to European and Euro-Atlantic integration, it has become openly dismissive of the opinions and recommendations from the international democratic community. As a result, for the first time in the last two decades, Georgia's commitment to the European path of development came to be reasonably doubted by a large part of internal and foreign observers.

So far, no principal player has a vision for finding the way out of the stand-off. The GD government denies the very existence of a crisis; President Salome Zourabichvili's initiative to lead an inclusive process aimed at reaching a national accord was mainly met with skepticism, most importantly, by the ruling party that reiterated that UNM has no moral right to stay in politics; the opposition does not accept the legitimacy of the status quo but cannot offer its supporters a strategy leading to a change.

The paper does not propose ready solutions. While future events are hard to predict, it is not unlikely that Georgia will stay in a state of a simmering crisis for some time to come. As such, pro-democracy forces and international friends of Georgian democracy should not only seek innovative ways to overcome this predicament but also to avoid a possibility of a sharper autocratic turn. In the meantime, the opposition should develop a more long-term strategy of political change.

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72, Akaki Tsereteli Ave., Tbilisi 0154 Georgia; www.cipdd.org
Contact: info@cipdd.org; +995 32 2355154

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THE CRISIS TIMELINE

31 October 2020 – *The first round of parliamentary elections are held in Georgia. In the proportional part, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party receives 48.2 percent of the vote (and 60 mandates out of 120). In addition, eight oppositional parties win parliamentary seats; among them, United National Movement (UNM) is the strongest with 27.2 percent.*

2 November 2020 – *All eight opposition parties that gained parliamentary seats declare that they did not consider the election results legitimate, refuse to take up their seats in Parliament, and demand snap parliamentary elections. They also refuse to take part in the second round of the elections in single-mandate constituencies. (GD carries all 30 of them, ultimately winning 90 out of 150 parliamentary seats).*

November-December 2020 – *Several rounds of negotiations between the ruling and opposition parties are held with mediation from US and EU ambassadors. However, no agreement is reached. The demand to call snap elections and release those who the opposition deemed political prisoners constitute the bone of contention.*

5 January 2021 – *Four MPs from the list of the Alliance of Patriots party enter Parliament. They desert the Alliance and found the European Socialists party.*

29 January 2021 – *Two elected MPs from The Citizens party join Parliament. Until the overall agreement was achieved, only six MPs from the opposition were represented in Parliament.*

23 February 2021 – *Nika Melia, the leader of the UNM, is arrested at the party headquarters. The charges relate to his actions during the so-called "Gavrilov's night" on 20-21 June 2019.*

1 March 2021 – *Charles Michel, the Chairman of the EU Council, arrives in Georgia. He expresses readiness to mediate a conflict between the government and the opposition. Both sides agree to his proposal.*

11 March 2021 – *Charles Michel appoints Cristian Danielsson, a Swedish diplomat, to be his representative in the negotiations. During March and April, Danielsson travels to Georgia several times to achieve an agreement between the parties.*

19 April 2021 – *GD and part of the opposition sign an agreement that informally comes to be called the Charles Michel Agreement. It provides for the release of the alleged political prisoners and obligates the government to call early parliamentary elections in the event that the GD receives less than 43 percent in the October 2021 municipal elections. On the opposition side, the UNM, European Georgia, and Labor refuse to sign the agreement. However, the UNM declares that it would join Parliament as soon as Nika Melia is released, and otherwise comply with the terms of the agreement.*

31 May 2021 – *The UNM faction joins Parliament. However, the party still refuses to sign the Charles Michel Agreement as it disagrees with its provision related to the amnesty for all those who could be charged with crimes related to the events of the so-called "Gavrilov night" of 20-21 June 2019.*

28 July 2021 – *The GD declares that it is walking out from the Charles Michel Agreement. It blames its decision on the fact that UNM, the largest opposition party, refused to sign it.*

1 September 2021 – *UNM signs the Charles Michel Agreement.*

1 October 2021 – *In the morning, Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's third president, publicizes a video saying he is back to Georgia. In the evening, he is arrested. An information is spread he went on hunger strike.*

2 October 2021 – *The first round of municipal elections is held in Georgia. GD gets 46.7 percent of the vote, while the UNM gets 30.7 percent.*

14 October 2021 – *A rally is held in Tbilisi demanding release of Mikheil Saakashvili. According to estimates, this is the largest opposition meeting since GD came to power.*

30 October 2021 – *In the second round of municipal elections, UNM wins Tsalendjikha mayoral race and narrowly loses in Kutaisi and Batumi.*

8 November 2021 – *Saakashvili is transferred to a prison hospital due to deteriorated health against his will.*

11 November 2021 – *Saakashvili announces he is ready to end hunger strike if transferred to a civilian hospital.*

19 November 2021 – *Saakashvili is transferred to Gori military hospital. He ends hunger strike.*

21 December 2021 – *UNM announces that about 180 of its members have started a hunger strike demanding Saakashvili's release.*

1 January 2022 – *UNM supporters end the hunger strike at Saakashvili's request.*

GENERAL BACKGROUND

For almost three decades of Georgia's independence, the country's governance system has been described by an unflattering category of a "hybrid regime." The democratic components of this hybridity include a commitment to democratic values professed by all political players, the general compliance of the constitution and legislation with democratic standards, the existence of a combative opposition capable of challenging the government, highly critical independent media, and active and competent civil society organizations. However, actual governance practices continuously display definite autocratic features: dominant parties led by powerful individuals rule without adequate checks-and-balances; the judiciary remains subservient to the government and is used to harass political opponents; the electoral environment gives a significant unfair advantage to the incumbent party; businesses continue to be dependent on the goodwill of the authorities. Previous breakthroughs, such as the 2003 Rose Revolution and an electoral change of power in 2012, bolstered hopes for further democratic consolidation. Significant progress was indeed achieved in some areas: in particular, following the 2003 change of power, there were conspicuous improvements in the area of good governance and the fight against systemic corruption. In addition, civil society development led to the emergence of more independent grass-roots movements; advocacy for rights of women, ethnic and religious minorities became more active and, occasionally, effective. Nevertheless, this was not enough for changing the overall character of the political system. Every change of government eventually led to a recreation of the dominant power system.

Propensity to crises is another general feature of Georgia's mixed political system. Incoming governments tend to enjoy a high level of public trust initially, but this is invariably followed by periods of disappointment, apathy, and growing political discontent. This discontent, combined with a perception that an unfair electoral environment may not allow for the change of power within constitutional rules, leads to crises that may include attempts to unseat the government through street protests. Against this background, the precedent of electoral change of power in 2012 looks like an exception rather than the rule.

Georgia is in the middle of such cyclical crisis. While the GD continues to enjoy the support of a large part of the public, this support tends to gradually erode. As it stands, opposition parties and many of their supporters do not accept the

legitimacy of the GD's electoral victories in the 2020 parliamentary and 2021 municipal elections. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to wait until the 2024 parliamentary elections for the next opportunity for change.

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In addition, Mikheil Saakashvili's arrival and imprisonment have further radicalized the political environment.

THE BOYCOTT AND ITS RESULTS: DEMOCRACY THROUGH INSTITUTIONS VS. DEMOCRACY OF STREET PROTESTS

Georgia's political situation came to be broadly defined as a 'crisis' after the 2020 parliamentary elections when all eight opposition parties that gained parliamentary mandates in the proportional part of elections proclaimed the results rigged, subsequently refusing to take their seats in Parliament and participate in the second round of vote in the single-mandate constituencies. Instead, they demanded snap elections, the release of those they deemed political prisoners, and reforms that would make fair elections possible.¹

This boycott was a highly controversial decision. It can be judged on two accounts: how much the charges of the electoral fraud were justified and whether the tactic of boycott used by the opposition could bring better results for Georgian democracy than the use of conventional parliamentary methods.

While domestic and international observers noted significant violations, none concluded that they impacted election results.² Most Georgian experts interviewed by the CIPDD also did not consider that the opposition presented a convincing case that the violations were large enough to change the result. The public was divided on the issue: according to a poll conducted in February, only 26 percent supported the boycott against 60 percent who did not. However, the picture was different among the opposition parties: 60 percent of UNM supporters approved of the boycott, but among supporters of all other opposition parties, only 36 percent approved, and 47 percent disapproved.³

The boycott supporters claimed that the most noteworthy violations, such as vote-buying, intimidation, and blackmail of voters, occurred before the elections or outside the precincts, making

them difficult to document. Moreover, political parties and monitoring organizations lack human resources for effective election-day monitoring. Outside big cities, election monitors were influenced and intimidated by local influential groups.

In general, a supposition that the violations might have influenced the overall result is believable. According to the official tally, the ruling party gained 48.22 percent of the vote, while the combined vote of eight opposition parties constituted 45.63 percent.⁴ Even if we only take the so-called “pro-Western opposition” (excluding the nativist and tacitly pro-Russian Patriots’ Alliance) that was expected to create a coalition government in case of electoral success, its joint result constitutes 42.49%. Therefore, even a few percentage points allegedly gained by GD through illegal methods could change the overall result. However, there is a great distance between what is believable and what is proven. Moreover, these calculations do not include the majoritarian component of the vote that determined the fate of 30 mandates out of 120; the incumbent party traditionally scores much better in this component.

Even if the opposition reasonably believed that it was deprived of the electoral victory, this was not sufficient to argue that the decision to boycott Parliament was wise.

Even if the opposition reasonably believed that it was deprived of the electoral victory, this was not sufficient to argue that the decision to boycott Parliament was wise. The opposition’s rhetoric implied that the boycott would deny legitimacy to the single-party Parliament and raise awareness of the undemocratic nature of Ivanishvili’s regime both domestically and internationally. The fact that, at least initially, all the opposition parties joined the boycott strengthened this expectation.

The most salient feature of the Georgian crisis consists of moving the center of the political life from elected institutions to negotiations mediated by international actors and street protests.

However, denying legitimacy to Parliament might have led to political consequences under two conditions: firstly, if the public displayed its solidarity with the opposition views by taking it to the streets; and secondly, if the international democratic community put the GD under pressure by endorsing the opposition claims. Neither happened; the opposition failed to mobilize large-scale protests, while the international democratic community pressured it to accept election results

and “work through the institutions.”⁵ Soon, two small opposition parties joined Parliament, allowing the GD to avoid the brand of “single-party parliament” formally.⁶ With this addition, Parliament had 96 out of 150 MPs and could perform its primary functions, allowing the GD to allege that a ‘crisis’ only existed in the perception of the opposition. By January, the GD ended all talks with the opposition, refusing to make any concessions. The boycott policy appeared to be a failure.

The arrest of the leader of the UNM, Nika Melia, on February 23, 2021⁷ – in relation to his role in the June 2019 protest demonstration – changed the West’s perception of the events in Georgia. Many observers assumed that the GD-led government was pushing Georgia astray from the path of European integration.⁸ The president of the EU Council, Charles Michel, took an unprecedented initiative to directly mediate negotiations between the GD and the opposition. Both parties accepted the negotiations process. Subsequently, he appointed a respected Swedish diplomat, Christian Danielsson, to lead the process.⁹

On April 19, the lengthy process of negotiations led to an agreement that honored a large part of the opposition’s demands. Most importantly, the GD agreed to call snap parliamentary elections in the event of it failing to obtain more than 43 percent of the vote in the October 2021 municipal elections. As such, the opposition could credibly say that the boycott policy bore fruit. Almost all opposition parties accepted the agreement and joined Parliament, even though the UNM delayed the decision by about a month, and refused to formally sign the document due to not accepting the specific way it addressed the release of the alleged political prisoners.¹⁰

The agreement was presumed to have ended the political crisis and demonstrated the positive and fruitful influence of the EU on Georgia.¹¹ However, the following events proved this assessment premature. On July 28, Irakli Kobakhidze, the chairman of the GD, announced that the party was walking out from the Agreement and proclaimed it null and void, pointing to the failure of the UNM to sign it as the explanation for this decision.¹²

Despite this, the opposition did not return to the boycott policy, notwithstanding several calls to do so. This could be understood as a tacit recognition that this policy was ineffective. Moreover, the option of a boycott was never considered again after the October 2021 municipal elections, even though the quality of

the electoral process did not appear to improve between the two elections.

Even while the boycott became largely discredited, the opposition has not returned to a “working through institutions” strategy. The arrival of Mikheil Saakashvili – Georgia’s third president – changed the political environment. Municipal elections results indicated that his return had a possible effect of strengthening the hand of the UNM party, as compared to other opposition parties.¹³ Demands to release him, as well as hunger strikes from Saakashvili and later some of his supporters’, soon moved to the center of Georgia’s political agenda.¹⁴

Arguably, the most salient feature of the Georgian crisis consists of moving the center of the political life from elected institutions to negotiations mediated by international actors, street protests, or extreme methods such as hunger strikes. Can this trend be reversed while GD is still in power? There are grounds to doubt this. While some decisions of the opposition may be considered rash and misguided, the general perception that state institutions are captured by the GD leadership, with Bidzina Ivanishvili’s invisible hand behind it, is also based on solid ground. This gives currency to the view that working exclusively through these captured institutions may be futile (even though, occasionally, one can also appeal to them). There is no visible roadmap to the “return to normalcy” yet.

POLARIZATION AND BREAKDOWN OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MAJOR POLITICAL PLAYERS

Rising polarization is broadly considered a growing problem in many accomplished democracies. A successful democracy requires competition, alongside mutual acceptance and respect between political parties as legitimate political players. This implies attitudes and practices of *forbearance*, whereby the party in power does not try to use its leverage to destroy the opponent and, in addition to following formal rules, demonstrates tolerance towards its views, however disagreeable it may find them. The absence of mutual acceptance and forbearance may lead to the erosion of the overall institutional framework of democracy.¹⁵

In Georgia, no tradition of mutual acceptance and forbearance has ever existed in the first place, and this may be the chief reason why

Georgian democracy never consolidated. Its first democratically elected president was ousted by force, and whenever the opposition raised a genuine challenge towards an incumbent power, the latter used its resources to harass it, often leading to episodes of violence.

Moreover, the Georgian version of political polarization was never based on explicit disagreements over core issues of policy, which even leads to several analysts denying the very existence of political polarization in Georgia;¹⁶ instead, prominent political actors presented their opponents as corrupt, immoral, and possibly even treacherous and criminal. Given this, there is nothing new about the current political stand-off in this regard.

The Georgian version of political polarization is much more dangerous than in the case of established democracies due to weak traditions of the rule of law and the near absence of effective checks-and-balances. The judicial system could never limit the political will of the government of the day. Therefore, here “polarization” implies not only extreme levels of mutual hostility between political actors. It also indicates the trend of the ruling party to harass the opposition through its control of the law enforcement and the judiciary systems, with its supporters calling for even more severe treatment of the opposition.

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The period of GD rule since 2012 has not only displayed all these trends in full but arguably moved the use of the justice system against its political opponents to a higher level as compared to its predecessors. As soon as the GD came to power, its explicit message has been that UNM should not only be defeated in elections but also eliminated from the political arena as a “criminal” force.¹⁷ Numerous criminal cases against leaders or other members of the UNM were broadly perceived as cases of selective justice.¹⁸ Irrespective of whether reasonable grounds to accuse leaders of the UNM of breaking the law while in government existed, the general rhetoric of the GD left few doubts that its actions were motivated by the wish for political vengeance. Furthermore, the government’s influence on the judiciary made a mockery of the right to a fair trial.

However, these trends became even more conspicuous in the last two or three years.

The UNM showed its resilience in the face of being harassed and demonized by the government, regularly receiving between one-fourth and one-third of the vote, which makes it unquestionably the leading party of the opposition. However, calls for its elimination from the political scene have stayed routine in the public rhetoric of the GD. In pre-election periods, presenting UNM as a criminal organization is the central topic of the government's campaigning¹⁹. In addition, almost all opposition parties are usually lumped together in public statements from GD leaders; therefore, by implication, attitudes towards UNM extend to other opposition parties. Even Giorgi Gakharia, who until his resignation in February 2021 served as the prime minister in the GD government, and created an opposition party soon after that, was portrayed by the GD as a secret collaborator of Mikheil Saakashvili, without presenting any evidence.²⁰ This was the case despite Gakharia's criticism of the ruling party being relatively mild, while his rhetoric towards the UNM remained quite harsh.²¹

Moreover, the GD has become much more confrontational towards the independent media and civil society in recent years. There have been numerous instances of applying financial and political pressure against several major independent TV broadcasters and their leadership. The owners of two independent media outlets – *TV Pirveli* and *Mtavari Arkhi* – became subject to criminal investigation and interrogation by the General Prosecutor's Office. Furthermore, several journalists have been physically injured and attacked by police forces during street protests.²² In July 2021, more than a dozen journalists covering anti-LGBTQ protests were injured and brutally attacked by members of far-right groups, while the police did not intervene. While several perpetrators were apprehended in later days, GD leaders put the blame more or less evenly on extreme-right groups, organizers of a failed gay pride event, and journalists; the latter were accused of being secret accomplices to the "radical opposition" (i.e., the UNM).²³ In 2019, Facebook removed several hundred fake accounts that were allegedly linked with the government and were used to attack and discredit civil society organizations (CSOs).²⁴ In addition, the incumbent Public Defender, Nino Lomjaria, was attacked as "Saakashvili's accomplice" for recommending more humane treatment of Mikheil Saakashvili while he was on a hunger strike.²⁵

Reversely, the ruling party is routinely referred to by the opposition as promoting Russian interests in Georgia or following orders from Russia. This rhetoric is not only characteristic of the UNM,

which started to present Bidzina Ivanishvili as "Russia's man" since the creation of his first opposition party in October 2011; this view appears to be shared by many other individuals who do not necessarily support the UNM. While there is no direct proof to substantiate these allegations, many government critics argue that the results of GD policies are conducive to Russian interests by taking Georgia away from the West (see the next section for further elaboration on this point). Whatever the validity of these claims, their widespread appeal among the opposition and its supporters demonstrates that the refusal to recognize the opponent as a legitimate political actor is mutual. This does not imply that both sides should be held equally responsible for the existing toxic polarization: the government sets the tone by refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the opposition and discrediting civil society and independent media.

The mutual failure to accept the legitimacy of the opponent leads to a near full breakdown of communication between the parties. The latest period in Georgian politics is characterized by further deterioration that threatens the very functioning of the democratic institutions. As an arena of both competition and cooperation between political parties, the Georgian Parliament may be the first victim. In this regard, the critical juncture might not have been the opposition's decision to boycott Parliament in November 2020, but events one year earlier when the GD reneged on its explicit promise to change the electoral system to a fully proportional system by the 2020 elections. This led to a radicalization of the opposition's demands and behavior; since then, MPs from the opposition have only occasionally taken part in parliamentary matters, while the center of Georgia's political life moved to the streets.²⁶

Parliament ceased to be an institution where the ruling and opposition parties communicated. Although they negotiated with each other, this was only through the mediation of representatives from the Western diplomatic community. In March 2020, for instance, the agreement on changes to Georgia's electoral system was signed at the US Ambassador's residence.²⁷ Following the 2020 parliamentary agreements, talks between the ruling party and the opposition started with mediation from Western ambassadors;²⁸ they subsequently broke down and only resumed after Charles Michel came to Georgia to personally mediate between the parties.²⁹ This situation showed that the government and opposition lost the political will to talk to one another unless induced by Western partners. Nevertheless, the ultimate failure of the *Charles Michel Agreement*

undermined the credibility of Western-mediated dialogue as well.

At the end of 2021, President Salome Zourabichvili pledged to lead an “inclusive process” of national reconciliation necessary for the route toward normalization.³⁰ So far, her ‘National Accord’ initiative has mostly been met with skepticism. This attitude is not unfounded. In response to the president’s pledge, Irakli Kobakhidze, the chairman of the GD, reiterated the view that the UNM has no moral right to stay in politics.³¹ Based on this premise, any kind of “inclusive dialogue” seems unlikely to materialize. While the President recognizes that the current condition is abnormal and has called for the introduction of mutually respectful relations between political opponents, it is difficult to expect any tangible results from this.

With this in mind, the concept of polarization alone, while legitimate, does not capture the depth of the problem faced by Georgian democracy. Indeed, it is the near-total breakdown of communication between the opposing political players, combined with low trust towards political institutions, that has created a perilous situation that may threaten the country’s overall stability or lead to autocratic backsliding.

WESTERN PARTNERS: FROM THE GOVERNMENT’S DISTANCING TO THE OPPOSITION’S OVERRELIANCE

For Georgia, its choice in favor of European and Euro-Atlantic integration has not only been a foreign policy decision but also an essential factor of democratization. While domestic political institutions and practices fail to ensure a proper system of checks-and-balances, Western leverage has been a significant moderating factor in Georgian politics. However, the recent crisis appears to have harmed relations between Georgia and its Western partners. This deterioration is often considered one of its most detrimental effects.

Initially, the April 2021 *Charles Michel Agreement* appeared to have confirmed the view that the West, represented by the EU, had a considerable and beneficial influence in Georgia: it seemed the EU’s mediation helped Georgian politicians find a way out of a severe crisis. This could be seen as a positive precedent that demonstrated the depth of EU commitment to Georgian democracy, as well as showing that the Georgian political class was open to accepting

advice from the EU. In this way, the agreement might have become a roadmap for turning the crisis into an opportunity for democratic progress.

However, the following events disproved this assessment. Prior to this, even though the GD government had never fully complied with EU or US advice, it still tended to avoid open disagreement with them. The GD had a record of reversing its positions following Western advice, as in the case of Charles Michel’s proposed mediation: the GD leaders had previously dismissed any possibility of concessions to or even dialogue with the opposition.³² Nevertheless, it later renewed the dialogue and made substantial concessions in the final agreement. Therefore, the GD’s decision to walk away from the agreement greatly damaged both the domestic political process and the trust between the Georgian political class and the West. The GD justified its decision by citing the failure of the UNM to sign the document. In his statement issued shortly after this, Charles Michel blamed both sides for the breakdown of the agreement.³³ However, most Western politicians and analysts placed primary responsibility on GD leadership.³⁴

The recent crisis may have significantly harmed relations between Georgia and its Western partners.

Whatever its motives might have been, the decision to annul the agreement became part of a general trend of mutual estrangement. In August 2021, the Georgian government announced that the country refused to receive a €75 million subsidized loan from the EU, justifying this decision by asserting that the loan no longer bore its economic significance since the country’s economy grew faster than initially expected.³⁵ The EU, however, noted that the loan was conditioned on Georgia’s progress in judiciary reform – something the government failed to meet.³⁶ Hence, by refusing the loan, the Georgian government had likely attempted to pre-empt a refusal from the EU to issue it, given this would be perceived as sanctioning the Georgian government for its failure to reform. In general, statements made by government leadership became more confrontational in tone and openly dismissive of Western opinion. For instance, on separate occasions, the GD chairman verbally attacked EU and US ambassadors.³⁷ This led to intense speculation among domestic government critics, as well as international politicians and analysts, as to whether Georgia was deviating from the pro-Western course that has been the cornerstone of its politics for the last two decades³⁸. However, despite the change in rhetoric, the GD still maintains its declarative commitment to its pro-Western course.

On the other hand, an important discrepancy in visions also revealed itself in relations between the Georgian opposition and Western partners. This became especially salient when the opposition's decision to boycott Parliament following the October 2020 elections was met with incomprehension by Western partners. They believed that the opposition failed to present a convincing case that electoral violations, however severe, altered the results; moreover, the opposition had little to gain by boycotting. During this period, Western partners promoting Georgian democracy and a large part of Georgia's opposition were increasingly disappointed with one another's stance. However, the opposition remained adamant about general commitment to Western integration and the norms of liberal democracy.

An important discrepancy in visions also revealed itself in relations between the Georgian opposition and Western partners.

The unexpected return of Mikheil Saakashvili to Georgia also became a factor of estrangement. Saakashvili returned against the advice of his Western friends, who could not understand what benefit could come out of this for himself or Georgian democracy. While Saakashvili's role in Georgia's breakthrough reforms during his period in power is appreciated in the West, his perceived turn to political populism and inclination to support more radical methods of political struggle alienated Western opinion.³⁹ Nevertheless, it remains a fact that the UNM, a party that is primarily mobilized around Saakashvili's personality, continues to dominate the opposition. In the West, it is a widespread view that the central role of the two opposing personalities, Bidzina Ivanishvili and Mikheil Saakashvili, is damaging for the prospects of Georgian democracy.⁴⁰

Being in a crisis may be becoming a new normal for the country.

The failure of the *Charles Michel Agreement* led to the impression that Western partners have become generally frustrated with Georgian political developments and there is much less interest in getting involved in Georgian domestic politics,⁴¹ with "Georgia fatigue" becoming a popular expression to describe a mood prevalent in Western capitals. In addition to concerns about Georgia's democratic backsliding, there appears to be an impression in the West that the Georgian opposition has unrealistic expectations with regards to its capacity to resolve the country's internal problems. While it would be an exaggeration to

say that the West has lost interest, one should not expect it to play a central role in overcoming the ongoing crisis.

CONCLUSIONS: WHERE GEORGIA STANDS

Being in a "crisis" may be becoming a new normal for the country. Deep disagreements within Georgian society do not concern specific policies – about which there are almost no debates – but basic rules of political life. As such, the functioning of key democratic institutions, including Parliament, is disrupted.

While the term "polarization" has become the most popular catchword to describe Georgia's ongoing troubles,⁴² it may not be the most adequate to address the essence and depth of the problem. Considering that supporters of both political parties hardly differ on key policy issues, some analysts question its very existence in Georgia.⁴³ The term "polarization" was transplanted to Georgia from the analysis of recent trends in established democracies, where it is feared that excessive polarization may threaten the stability of core democratic institutions. However, in Georgia's hybrid regime, these institutions had never consolidated in the first place.

While Georgian legislation generally meets the standards of electoral democracy, deeply embedded popular attitudes and political practices do not allow for fair political competition and routine change of parties in government. Among these attitudes and practices, the most important may be the delegitimization of political opponents and mistrust towards electoral institutions. This makes intermittent political crises effectively unavoidable. Denying legitimacy to political opponents is a regular feature of political competition in Georgia. Opponents are not criticized for having wrong ideas about public good; they are deemed either traitors or criminals or, in relatively mild cases, deeply corrupt.

The current political stand-off is another example of this delegitimization, although it arguably constitutes an especially severe case. While the UNM often presents the GD as tacitly allying with Russia – a source of existential threat to Georgia – the GD routinely presents the UNM as a criminal organization that does not have the moral right to stay in politics. Moreover, any opposition group that sides with UNM on specific issues is grouped together with the UNM, implying collusion with criminals. This also extends to many European politicians and

Georgia's Public Defender, who have called for Saakashvili's humane treatment, as well as NGOs and media outlets that are critical of the government.

In cases where such assumptions are made, it appears more legitimate to push the limits of legality and fairness when confronting a political opponent. The ruling party uses unfair and often illegal means against the opposition, especially during periods when popular support decreases and its position in power becomes shaky. The use of these methods creates legitimate doubts concerning the legitimacy of the electoral outcomes. Against this backdrop, the opposition tends to blame its political defeats on electoral fraud or an uneven playing field, whether or not there are sufficient grounds for such claims. In turn, it becomes challenging to measure whether electoral irregularities influence final election results. Furthermore, many opposition supporters become skeptical regarding the electoral process, leading to a preference for pressure through street actions.

In Georgia, all changes of power have been preceded by periods of intense polarization, harassment of political opponents, occasional political violence, and expectations of turmoil. On two occasions (1993 and 2003), the change of power occurred through unconstitutional means, though physical violence was avoided in the latter case. In 2007 and 2009, the opposition of the day unsuccessfully tried to emulate the Rose Revolution experience and force the UNM government out of power through street protests. The case of 2012 – when a constitutional change of power occurred – has been a welcome exception. Nonetheless, the election was preceded by similar polarization and expectations of political mayhem. In that sense, the ongoing crisis may be considered a 'normal' stage within the political cycle of Georgia's hybrid regime.

How can we deal with this crisis? While looking for a way out, analysts and activists may fall for two kinds of temptations. One is to focus on deep-seated structural problems, such as the majority of the public trusting leaders rather than institutions, weakness of political parties and civil society, lack of debate on policy issues, and of culture of mutual respect and forbearance between political players. While all these problems are important, they cannot be solved in the short run; the ongoing political crisis must be dealt with much more urgently.

The second is the overreliance on legislative reforms. While there may be room for further improvement of the legislation, no legislative

reforms can guarantee the emergence of an independent judiciary, impartial electoral administration, the eradication of pressure against the opposition, and the solution to other core democracy deficits in Georgia.

We should instead focus on realistic scenarios for the foreseeable future. At this point, there is no clear roadmap for moving away from the ongoing crisis, with no elections foreseen until 2024. While the arrival of Mikheil Saakashvili on the eve of elections, his subsequent imprisonment, hunger strike and trial may have made the situation even tenser, it has so far failed to become a game-changer. Indeed, it may have further strengthened the dominant position of the UNM within the opposition, but there are no indicators that it strengthened the opposition vis-à-vis the government.

In Georgia, opponents are not criticized for having wrong ideas about public good; they are deemed either traitors or criminals or, in relatively mild cases, deeply corrupt.

Unless some unexpected developments occur, Georgia may be poised for a relatively protracted period of political uncertainty and tension. Any credible scenarios for the foreseeable future include the reality of political polarization, whereby the two political forces, under the personalities of Bidzina Ivanishvili and Mikheil Saakashvili, dominate the political scene. In the last two elections, these two parties combined got 75.4 and 77.3 percent of the total vote, respectively (in the proportional part)⁴⁴. This means that a large majority of the Georgian electorate presumes that its choice is between these two players. Moreover, political players competing for the brand of "the third force" fail to attract strong enough public support. Analysts and activists who are critical of both main players may wish for the strengthening of these "third forces"; if this happens, it will likely have a positive effect on the political situation. However, basing an overall strategy on such a probability is unrealistic.

Mikheil Saakashvili's arrival may have further strengthened the dominant position of the UNM within the opposition, but there are no indicators that it strengthened the opposition vis-à-vis the government.

This does not imply that if the government changes, it is predestined that the UNM will replace it. Nobody can predict this, and the UNM leaders themselves have repeatedly signaled their readiness to work in a coalition with other parties. However, at this time, it is impossible to imagine the future success of the opposition without presuming an important role for the UNM.

WAYS FOR THE FUTURE: SCENARIOS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The crisis is still ongoing and, at this point, can be described as an impasse. As such, it is too early to speak about its outcome or summarize its results. The government tries and fails to present the situation as “business-as-usual” and keeps speaking of forcing the UNM out of the political scene. However, it has not been able to achieve the latter. On the other hand, the opposition does not accept the current condition as legitimate but is unable to present a clear roadmap to its change to its supporters.

Where can the situation go from here? The most preferable scenario would be that both the ruling party and opposition (on the opposition side, we include both the UNM and other opposition players) recognize the existing impasse for what it is and jointly look for a negotiated outcome within constitutional norms. President Zourabichvili’s *Inclusive Process* initiative may constitute a suitable format for this effort. However, at this point, the probability of such development is low.

One may imagine some unforeseen events leading to an exacerbation of the crisis thus creating new dangers and opportunities alike. The danger is that the GD may use any radical moves from its opponents for the crackdown on the opposition and its allies, such as attacking independent media. This might significantly curtail the existing level of freedoms and turn Georgia’s hybrid regime into an autocratic one. On the one hand, persistent rhetoric demonizing the opposition as criminal, the instrumentalization of the law enforcement and judiciary against its opponents, and an increasing trend towards ignoring advice from Western partners means we cannot discount this possibility. On the other hand, the resilience of the Georgian opposition, civil society, and the media give hope that the probability of a sharp autocratic turn may be prevented. A hypothetical exacerbation of tensions may also lead to snap elections and the creation of a new government, possibly in the form of a coalition. That would conclude the current political cycle and open new opportunities for democratic progress.

If none of these low-probability scenarios materialize, Georgia may be stuck with the existent condition of semi-stability. So far, the crisis has affected core institutions of representative democracy, but the routine processes of state government continue more or less unperturbed.

Indeed, they may go on this way, allowing the GD government to deny the very existence of a crisis. This last scenario, while more probable, will also be damaging as it may imply the gradual erosion of existing democratic achievements, as well as further estrangement from the West.

Under these circumstances, efforts of pro-democracy actors should be focused not only on resolving the ongoing crisis but also on containing damage coming from it. From this perspective, the resilience showed by the Georgian opposition, civil society, and the independent media is encouraging. Criticism of the opposition for its continuing overdependence on personalities, lack of clear strategy and vision, and failure to develop well-institutionalized parties is justified. Nevertheless, it should be appreciated that the opposition continues to mount a meaningful challenge against the dominant party and arguably even gain some, albeit modest, ground over time. However, one should not take this for granted: the existing, even if unsatisfying, development of democratic institutions is an important achievement of the last thirty years and should be maintained.

It is another ground for optimism that, despite some dramatic developments – particularly the period of Mikheil Saakashvili’s hunger strike when there appeared to be a real threat to his life – the UNM did a generally good job of keeping protests within limits of legality, even though there were calls from some of the party faithful for more radical actions.

Despite all its mentioned actions and rhetoric that run counter to democratic norms, the government did not give up its declarative commitment to the policy of European integration and general democratic principles. While this is utterly insufficient, even such declarative commitment may have some constraining effect on government actions.

Based on these assumptions, what can Georgia’s pro-democracy forces reasonably expect from major political players in the foreseeable future to limit the damage from the ongoing crisis is limited and increase the probability of an eventual positive outcome?

With regards to the Georgian government and the GD party, the main demand should be for it to accept the legitimacy of the opposition, give up on the rhetoric of forcing it out of the political field, and refrain from using the law enforcement and judiciary systems against political opponents. In order to attain the last objective,

a moratorium shall be announced opposing the use of the law enforcement and judiciary against political opponents regarding cases related to their past political activities. Furthermore, the ruling party should accept participation in a strategic dialogue aimed at finding a way out of the political impasse. Given the trends of recent years, this may sound unrealistic. However, it should be made clear that any normalization of the situation without such steps is unthinkable while the GD is in power.

With regards to the Georgian opposition parties, an explicit consensus should be built on persistent strategy within the existing constitutional framework, however imperfect existing political institutions may be. It should be recognized that any reckless actions will undermine the legitimacy of the opposition and may serve as an excuse for an attack against democratic freedoms and institutions. The opposition should focus on a more long-term strategy of democratic change, something that it has failed to do thus far. This, however, does not rule out using different forms of political protest in its ongoing struggle. The opposition should also overcome its exaggerated expectations from the support of Western political actors. One of the

most important lessons learned from the past year might be that the influence of Western actors on Georgian political developments is important but limited. Moreover, that is how it should be: any significant and sustainable democratic progress may only be achieved through the efforts of Georgian political actors.

With regards to Western friends of Georgian democracy, it should be stressed that continuing attention and involvement is an important, even if not sufficient, factor for democratic progress in Georgia. While norms and institutions of liberal democracy are under attack worldwide, Georgia's overall commitment to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration, persistent efforts to achieve progress in embedding democratic values and norms make it a strategically valuable ally for Western democracies, despite its propensity to political instability and crises. Western actors should be wise, principled, and consistent in their assessments of Georgian development – public or private – and in applying conditionality mechanisms where appropriate. In addition, they should support any promising initiatives coming from Georgian civil society or political actors that aim to improve the existing situation.

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Appendix

THE YEAR OF POLITICAL CRISIS IN GEORGIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY

(October 2020 – September 2021)

Results of an expert survey

August-September 2021

In August-September 2021, CIPDD conducted a survey of the Georgian political expert community concerning the political crisis that occurred between the October 2020 parliamentary and October 2021 municipal elections in Georgia. It included a quantitative section in which 100 respondents answered a CIPDD questionnaire online and a qualitative section based on five in-depth interviews. This report summarizes the obtained results.

Main Findings

More than an year that has passed between the October 2020 parliamentary elections and the October 2021 municipal elections was widely perceived as that of a political crisis in Georgia, despite the variety of opinions on exactly what constitutes its specific features. Most respondents believe that the political system has headed toward a more autocratic direction, as well as there being signs of the country distancing itself from Western political actors, such as the EU. In addition, many see trust toward political institutions as being further undermined.

In the opinion of many experts, the opposition's decision not to enter Parliament after the October 2020 elections (whether one approves or disapproves of it) was just another indicator of the crisis rather than its chief characteristic.

A large majority of the respondents blamed policies of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party for the aforementioned negative trends, as it prioritized the interest of maintaining power above that of democracy. At the same time, many saw the opposition as part of the problem as well. The latter's main shortcomings consist of lacking a clear strategy, fragmentation and a weak capacity to mobilize society. Many experts also question the opposition's commitment to democratic values.

Experts were almost evenly divided with regards to approving or disapproving the opposition's initial decision to boycott Parliament in the wake of the October 2020 elections. The majority believed that the opposition failed to present a convincing case that the total of electoral violations affected the final results. However, many acknowledged

that proving this was objectively hard, as most violations (such as voter intimidation, vote-buying, abuse of the so-called administrative resources, etc.) occurred in the pre-election period, making it difficult to document and measure their result.

Even though an April agreement between the ruling party and the opposition brokered by the EU (the so-called *Charles Michel Agreement*) ultimately failed, most experts still pinned great hopes on Western involvement in Georgia's internal political processes. They believed that the West should increase diplomatic pressure against the Georgian government. However, several were skeptical of using severe sanctions, as it may push the GD further away from the West.

Most respondents shared the view that with autocratic practices becoming more widespread, Georgia was effectively moving away from the West and coming closer to Russia. Nevertheless, most experts expected the GD government to maintain a declarative pro-Western orientation, as an open pro-Russian stance would be too unpopular among the public.

A large majority of respondents believed that the growing mistrust toward electoral institutions in Georgia was mainly conditioned by the political environment created by the government. Some alluded to the imperfect legislation, though the majority did not deem it the main reason.

Most experts linked the prospect of democratic progress with another change of government through elections. A majority believed that such a change is possible in Georgia, but only on the condition that the support for the opposition becomes considerably stronger than that for the ruling party, inasmuch as it can offset the

effect of the illegal methods used by the latter. Maintaining or increasing Western involvement and greater public mobilization in support of democratic norms and institutions were also considered preconditions for democratic change.

Most experts did not fully rule out the prospect of a *revolutionary scenario* (an unconstitutional change of power as a result of street actions) in Georgia. However, they believed that the probability for such a development was low as most of Georgian society is not inclined toward supporting this scenario at present.

The Political Background

In the wake of the October 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia, all eight opposition parties holding parliamentary mandates declared the elections were conducted in an undemocratic manner. They did not recognize the legitimacy of the result and refused to take up their seats in Parliament. Most political commentators and the international democratic community assessed this as a serious political crisis that threatened Georgia's political development. However, the ruling Georgian Dream party disagreed with this assessment, saying that the problem did not amount to a political crisis; what was happening was just erratic behavior from the opposition.

On 19 April 2021, a deal between the ruling party and a large part of the opposition was reached following an EU mediation effort. As a result, most opposition MPs took up their seats in Parliament. After this, many people considered the crisis resolved. However, a 28 July decision made by the Georgian Dream party to walk away from the agreement showed that this assessment was premature. This allows us to assess the whole period between the 2020 parliamentary elections and the 2021 municipal elections as that of a political crisis. This research does not cover the municipal elections and events developed after its first round.

Survey Objectives and Methodology

This survey aimed to study expert assessments of key events during this crisis year. While it cannot claim to be representative, respondents included most figures from whom one expects the most competent understanding of Georgia's political processes. These people and/or the organizations they represent influence public opinion and perceptions of political events on a much larger social circle; supposedly, this impact may also extend to decisions made by political players.

For the objectives of this research, we defined *experts* as academic scholars, fellows of NGOs and think tanks involved in the monitoring and analysis of democracy-related issues, leading and influential journalists who cover these issues and independent analysts whose services are commissioned by important research organizations.

Admittedly, a limitation of this research was that most of the surveyed experts tended to be critical to actions of the incumbent government. However, this did not rule out their critical attitudes to the opposition as well. We endeavored to involve people of different political convictions in our research, but the result is that assessments that are rather critical toward government actions prevail. This trend may be partly offset by the fact that the ruling party's attitudes are well known from their public statements.

The survey took place over a month from 22 August to 22 September, 2021 using the *Survey Monkey* platform. We sent out the questionnaire to more than 300 experts and received exactly 100 responses. Of these respondents, forty-five are academics, thirty work for think tanks and/or NGOs, twelve for the media, and seven are independent analysts. The remaining five are also involved in analytical work, but they could not definitively attribute themselves to any of the above categories.

We asked the experts to select a response from the proposed answers to each of our questions that aligned closest to their views. In addition, they could elaborate and argue in favor of their choices in their comments. This added a qualitative element to the online survey.

Moreover, we carried out five in-depth interviews with leading Georgian experts. Their views are not much different from the results of the quantitative survey, but the interview format allowed us to gain more nuanced assessments.

What kind of crisis?

As previously mentioned, there is little consensus in Georgia with regards to defining the developments within this period as a *crisis*. The GD did not share this assessment, though statements of its representatives on this issue were not always consistent; sometimes they recognized the existence of a crisis but described it as "artificial". Moreover, even the people who assessed the situation as that of a crisis disagreed on interpreting its nature. For instance, there were different opinions on whether the signing of the *Charles Michel*

Agreement constituted its end. We observed the expert opinion on this matter.

A clear majority (68 out of 100 respondents) believed that the whole period since 2020 parliamentary elections should be considered that of a crisis (respectively, the *Charles Michel Agreement* failed to end it). This attitude could have been influenced by the fact that the respondents knew that the GD eventually opted out of the agreement. 22 respondents said that the *Charles Michel Agreement* did mark the end of the crisis, but after its annulment, the state of a crisis resumed. There were only two respondents who did not share the assessment that the state of affairs constituted a crisis, supposedly because the government fully controlled the levers of political power, and the functioning of state institutions was in no way impeded.

The qualitative component of the survey (comments and in-depth interviews) demonstrated a broader diversity of opinion. Many respondents see the substance of the crisis in much broader terms than simply the presence or absence of the opposition in Parliament. This includes an especially acute level of political polarization, a full breakdown of communication between the ruling party and the opposition (save for formats mediated by international players), growing mistrust toward institutions, an increase of authoritarian practices in government actions and the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, among other components. Furthermore, there is no consensus on the timeframe of the crisis. For instance, some believe it began in June 2019 with the so-called “Gavrilov’s Night,”¹ and has since been expressed in different ways; others believe that the crisis comprises the period studied in this research.

Who or what is to blame?

Whether or not it is right to qualify the mentioned developments as a crisis, it is difficult to deny that the parliamentary boycott and the president of the European Council’s subsequent involvement in mediating relations between the ruling party and the opposition are extraordinary occasions that cannot be called normal for a democracy. Who is responsible for the events taking this turn?

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (89 percent) laid the blame primarily at the government’s door; however, almost half (49 percent) considered the opposition responsible as well. Only ten respondents held both parties equally responsible. In the in-depth interviews, the experts divided responsibility between the government and the opposition in a proportion of roughly 60:40 or 70:30.

Another question referred to the GD abandoning the *Charles Michel Agreement*. The government pinned the blame on the opposition, mainly the UNM; it was only responding to the UNM’s failure to sign the document. However, only one expert shared this judgment. Three others also held the opposition primarily responsible for the failure of the agreement, but they did not approve of the GD walking away from it either. 56 percent held GD exclusively responsible; 38 others shared the view that parties who did not sign the agreement shared responsibility because they equipped the ruling party with a pretext for its annulment.

In a separate question, we inquired about the reasons for the public and the political class lack of trust in electoral institutions and procedures. Only three respondents shared a view that Georgia’s legislation and political environment are adequate for conducting fair elections. 59 percent thought that “the political environment that is caused by the government policies” is the main reason for the mistrust, while 35 percent thought that, in addition to the previous factor, important shortcomings in legislation also exist. In the qualitative part of the survey, experts also mentioned factors of political culture and high political polarization; quite a few expressed an opinion that the opposition shares the blame for the political environment that is inopportune for carrying out fair elections.

How justified was the decision to boycott Parliament and the subsequent decision to end the boycott?

On this issue, we addressed the experts with two questions. The first was related to the scale of violations in the 2020 parliamentary elections, something that served as grounds for the boycott. We asked respondents whether it could

¹ On 20 June 2019, mass protests erupted responding to the fact that Sergei Gavrilov – a member of Russian Duma who was presiding over the session of the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy – addressed the Assembly from the seat of the speaker of Georgian Parliament and in the Russian language. The session was cut short, Gavrilov soon left the country, while the speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Irakli Kobakhidze, resigned. On the same evening, the police started to disperse the rally in front of the parliament building. This operation continued until the morning and led to brawls between the police and the demonstrators.

be said that the scale of the violations affected the result. On this issue, opinions were widely divided: 37 respondents said they did not have sufficient data to answer this question; 36 others said that the opposition was deprived of victory; 17 respondents, however, supported the opposite view and felt the scope of the violations did not affect the result.

Keeping this in mind, it is only natural that opinions were also divided concerning the opposition's decision to boycott Parliament. 37 respondents considered the boycott a mistake, 44 thought that it was both right to boycott Parliament and end the boycott after the *Charles Michel Agreement* came into force; 12 supported a more radical position: the boycott was right, but it was wrong to accept the agreement and take up parliamentary seats.

In the qualitative component of the research, many respondents claimed that the election day violations were not too big or there was no sufficient information about them. According to this, it is possible to determine why the opposition failed to build a convincing case demonstrating that electoral violations affected the final result. As such, the decision to boycott was viewed by many as an exaggerated and overly emotional reaction.

Nevertheless, the result may have been primarily (perhaps, decisively) affected by the violations in the pre-election period or outside the precincts, such as vote-buying, intimidation, blackmail and the abuse of administrative resources. It is particularly difficult to document these violations and measure their impact. Some respondents added that both opposition parties and independent watchdog organizations lacked sufficient resources to adequately record the violations.

We also asked the experts to assess the opposition's decision to accept the terms of the *Charles Michel Agreement*. A large majority, 80 percent, considered accepting the terms of the agreement the right decision, while 16 thought it was the wrong decision. However, the latter group differed in their reasoning: nine thought that the opposition could reach a better deal by continuing the boycott, while seven others believed that given the prospect of reaching a better deal was unlikely, the opposition betrayed its principles.

Who benefitted from the crisis?

Whether or not it is possible to justify specific steps taken by the ruling or opposition parties, it makes sense to assess their political results: who *benefitted* from the parliamentary boycott

and the government's subsequent reaction? Did it help the opposition to increase its popular support and its chances to show better results at the next elections?

Regarding this issue, opinions were divided. 42 respondents thought that the steps taken during the crisis would not affect the results of the municipal elections, 22 – that it would strengthen the opposition, while 19 percent believed that it strengthened the ruling party.

The experts elaborated on these assessments in the qualitative component of the survey. As it was the decision of the opposition to boycott Parliament, it were its gains or losses that naturally attracted greater attention. In the first stage, shortcomings of this choice were more obvious: The opposition failed to mobilize large-scale street protests, and its decision was unequivocally criticized by the international democratic community. The latter's opinion carries considerable weight with those Georgians who prioritize democratic development.

The boycott decision proved especially damaging for smaller opposition parties as they had a harder time distinguishing themselves from the UNM, even though they had tried to distance themselves from the party prior to the elections. This was corroborated by the results of the February 2021 public opinion survey conducted by the International Republican Institute: 60 percent of UNM supporters considered the boycott the right decision (46 percent supported it “strongly”), while a clear majority of those who voted for other opposition parties did not approve of the boycott. By making a decision that contradicted the opinions of the majority of their followers, smaller opposition parties risked damaging their image ahead of the next elections—this was later confirmed through the results of the 2021 municipal elections.

On the other hand, the government's response to the crisis, especially the arrest of Nika Melia, significantly damaged its relations with the Western partners. There were numerous expressions of concern that Georgia might be giving up on its ambition to become a European-style democracy. The result was a much higher level of involvement from the EU in the Georgian crisis and, eventually, the agreement around the EU-mediated document. The latter constituted a limited victory for the opposition. Now there appeared a realistic chance of its main demand—calling early parliamentary elections—being fulfilled. The opposition could also reasonably claim that the boycott policy brought some tangible results.

However, the same development had negative consequences for the opposition as well: The variety of attitudes toward the agreement undermined its unity. This may explain why the expert assessments of the political results of the boycott decision were so equivocal and divided, as some suggested that the crisis damaged both parties, hence both the political class in general and the image of the country.

What will the crisis bring to relations between Georgia and the West?

The events covered in this report have led to an unprecedented episode in which the highest level of the EU leadership has become directly involved in resolving Georgia's internal problems. Charles Michel, the chairman of the EU Council, decided to personally serve as a mediator and later appointed a special representative to mediate the crisis. This demonstrated that the EU highly valued Georgia's democratic progress and, arguably, was ready to put its reputation on the line to help achieve it. It also created expectations in Georgia that an agreement negotiated on such a high level would serve as a kind of road map for the progress of the Georgian democracy, as neither party would go against the authority of the EU. However, the GD decision to walk away from this agreement, as well as the UNM's reluctance to sign it (even though it expressed readiness to follow its provisions) frustrated these expectations.

Concerning this issue, we put several questions to the experts. The first asked for a general assessment: How important is the role of the West in Georgia's democratization? The results were unequivocal in showing that despite the failure of the agreement reached through Michel's mediation, expectations related to Western involvement continue to be rather high. 58 respondents agreed to a contention that "The involvement of the Western partners in Georgia's democratic progress is crucial", while 16 percent accepted that "The involvement of the Western partners in Georgia's democratic progress is an important, though not the only factor". Only 16 percent agreed that "The involvement of the Western partners in Georgia's democratic progress is a positive factor, however, it does not have a significant impact". No respondents considered Western involvement as superfluous or counterproductive, despite that option also being available.

The failure of the *Charles Michel Agreement* was frustrating not only for the Georgian supporters of democracy but also for Georgia's friends in the West. Is it possible that they may start to

doubt whether they still can meaningfully assist Georgia on its way to democracy? We checked the expert opinion on this: What changes in Western strategies toward Georgia do they expect after the latest events? A strong plurality withheld their opinion: 47 respondents agreed that it is too early to judge. 28 percent expect Western partners to strengthen their pressure on the GD government, while 20 of them thought that "Frustrated by Charles Michel's unsuccessful efforts, the Western partners are likely to show less interest toward Georgia." The qualitative component of the research confirmed that most experts expect continuing involvement of the West and invest great hopes in it.

Apart from these expectations, what would respondents want the West to do under the circumstances? On this point, the opinion is relatively unified: 69 respondents agreed that the West should increase pressure on the GD government (including the use of sanctions), while 23 would like "an equal pressure on the government and the opposition." Nobody chose the option suggesting that the opposition should be the chief target of Western pressure so that it becomes more "constructive"; on the other hand, nobody agreed with the contention that "The West has exhausted its capabilities at this point and should refrain from active involvement."

Last but not least, following a number of developments over the past few months (including, the GD walking away from the *Charles Michel Agreement*, the government's refusal to accept EU financial support, increasingly frequent criticism of the EU representatives by GD leaders, etc.), doubts are frequently expressed as to whether this might imply a change of Georgia's general political course: Could it be that the GD may give up on Georgia's traditional pro-Western orientation and choose to come closer to Russia instead? This survey showed that experts take this consideration seriously. 53 respondents, a majority, agreed that "Georgia will maintain its declared pro-Western orientation; however, in reality, it will get closer to Russia". 26 percent believe that "Georgia will openly make steps undermining its pro-Western policies". Only 17 believed that "Georgia will maintain its pro-Western orientation at the same level as in the previous years."

In the qualitative component of the research, it was highlighted that public support for Georgia's pro-Western orientation is the main factor that prevents the government from refusing to openly give up on its declared policy of integration with the West. Therefore, most respondents did not expect any sharp change in the government

policies. Nevertheless, it is understood that the political crisis significantly damaged relations between Georgia and the West. It demonstrated that Western influence on Georgia's internal processes is somewhat limited as the GD government is increasingly prepared to openly ignore Western opinions and recommendations. The crisis undermined the trust of Western players toward the GD government, even though many of Georgia's Western friends are also rather critical toward the main player within the opposition, the UNM.

Against this background, it may seem paradoxical that support for and expectations from Western involvement in Georgia's internal processes remain very high. We can be fairly confident in assuming that on this point, the expert opinion corresponds to attitudes of a large part of the Georgian society. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask whether Georgia's political class or, more broadly, the Georgian society ascribes an exaggerated role to external players. Many experts understand that this may be a problem, with several considering it necessary to stress that internal forces are primarily responsible for the progress in democracy in Georgia. However, a strong skepticism also transpired toward Georgia's political class. Under conditions of severe political polarization, respondents struggle to expect the parties to display the readiness and capacity for dialogue and cooperation necessary for democratic consolidation (for further elaboration, please see below). Moreover, the opposition continues to be too weak to effectively contain the government's inclination toward using authoritarian methods. Over recent decades, Western involvement helped to mitigate, if not solve, these problems.

As for concerns of specific forms of involvement, most respondents expect a continuation of diplomatic pressure on the Georgian government from the West so that the government adheres to democratic norms. However, a certain vagueness appears to exist regarding specific forms of this pressure. Several respondents are wary of strong sanctions as they may push the government further away from a Western orientation; some think that sanctions may also encourage a revolutionary scenario in Georgia. However, withholding financial aid if the Georgian government fails to meet its obligation is generally considered a fully legitimate measure.

How realistic is the prospect of a change of power in Georgia by constitutional means?

Within Georgian society, a contentious issue remains whether it is realistically possible to

change the country's government through constitutional means. So far, there has only been one precedent of such a change in the history of independent Georgia, which occurred in 2012. It remains to be seen whether this precedent will stay an exception or become a rule.

An extremely high degree of political polarization, an unfair electoral environment, mistrust toward political institutions (in particular, the electoral administration and the courts) and a belief that the ruling party will always manage to manipulate election results in its favor increases the probability that at least part of the opposition will tilt toward a strategy of changing the government by "revolutionary" means. This might take the form of peaceful street protests, as seen in Georgia in 2003, in Ukraine in 2004 and 2014, and in Armenia in 2018. It was especially interesting to study expert opinion on this issue.

In a democracy, the competition between parties should be combined with a modicum of mutual respect and consensus regarding the basic rules of the game. For this, the contending parties must maintain dialogue, especially in critical situations. In lieu of such dialogue, there is a higher probability of events going outside the constitutional limits. How ready are contending parties for such a dialogue in Georgia?

60 percent of respondents trust that dialogue is still possible in the future, but only with Western mediation, while 26 percent rules out any dialogue altogether. Only six percent believed that the Georgian government and opposition can talk to each other without mediators. Admittedly, this is the most pessimistic and concerning result of this survey.

Keeping this in mind, how probable is it that the GD government, like its predecessor, will eventually leave through elections? There is a difference of opinion on this. Only 28 experts expressed clear optimism on this account: They agreed to the proposition that "If the opposition is genuinely more popular than the GD, nothing will prevent them from winning." On the other hand, only nine respondents shared an extremely pessimistic assessment: "The government will always be able to manipulate the election results in such a way as to never allow the opposition to win." The majority, 59 percent, is cautiously optimistic but with a specific precondition: "The opposition can win the elections; however, for this, they will need a very big margin of support." It is difficult to say how big that margin should be, though one expert ventured an opinion that the support for the opposition should surpass that for the

government by about 7-8 percent; less than that will not be enough to offset the use of illegal methods (vote-buying, intimidation, fraud, etc.) employed by the incumbent party.

A revolutionary scenario is usually seen as an alternative to the change of government through electoral means. We asked the experts how probable such development may be for Georgia (with a caveat that we are not asking how *desirable* they deem it to be). The respondents avoided unequivocal answers to this question. 59 of them agreed with the statement: “The likelihood of a revolutionary scenario is low, but I cannot exclude this possibility.” Fifteen others believe that “The likelihood of government being changed through elections or a revolution are equal,” while eight more assessed the probability of the revolutionary scenario as “high.” Only twelve respondents were confident that “the GD government will only be replaced through elections”.

Finally, we asked the experts for a general assessment: How did the events of the last year influence general prospects for Georgia’s democratic development? On this account, a pessimistic view prevailed: 74 respondents believed that “Overall, this year’s events have drawn us closer to autocracy.” Fifteen supported the view that nothing changed with regards to the quality of democracy in Georgia, and only a single person agreed that “this year’s events have increased the chances for Georgia’s democracy”.

As we had expected, the qualitative component of the research revealed that the experts consider a revolutionary scenario to be extremely undesirable. They also offered explanations as to why they deemed its probability low: Compared to the last democratic revolution in 2003, the overall economic situation has improved; the Georgian Orthodox Church, an especially authoritative social player, is supportive of the incumbent party, and the majority of the people is firmly committed to electoral procedures. Furthermore, the popular discontent tends to increase, but it has not yet reached a critical point whereby a large enough segment of the society deems revolutionary methods justified.

Notably, one respondent even considered asking this question to be unethical, as a reader of this report may interpret the contention that a revolutionary scenario cannot be ruled out as a call for a revolution. We want to make it clear that it is the belief of the authors of this report that the prospect of change in power through revolutionary means in Georgia is both extremely dangerous and undesirable. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that if skepticism toward a possibility of changing the government through elections exists, this will push some people to at least consider a revolutionary alternative. While most experts think such a development is unlikely in the near future, they also admit that predictions are unreliable, and the public mood may change quite abruptly at some point.

