

Caucasus ELECTIONSWATCH

A weekly review of elections related processes in the Caucasus Region

16 October 2012

Commentary

The phenomena of Bidzhina and regional issues

As the process of political transition in Georgia gathers pace, and with the prospect of political co-habitation between the two main political forces in the country, at least for the next year, the question now needs to be asked how the new situation will impact the region of the Caucasus as a whole.

The Georgian Dream leader, Bidzhina Ivanishvili has kept his comments on foreign policy to firm commitments to Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and some general comments on rebuilding relations with Russia. However some of his closest associates have spoken more specifically on the need to recalibrate Georgia's foreign policy to make it more focused towards the region and the immediate neighbours.

In an exclusive interview with Caucasus Elections Watch three weeks before the election, one of the Coalition leaders, Irakli Alasania, now designated as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence in the new Government, stated "Georgia's Foreign policy should be refocused on establishing regional stability in the Caucasus. It should concentrate on assisting the neighbours to settle their differences and build a more integrated region."

A few days later, the Georgian Dream Foreign Affairs spokesman, and now designated as the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the new Parliament, Tedo Japaridze, speaking in Brussels, also called for a refocus of foreign policy to give more attention to regional issues.

These are welcome developments that would be appreciated in western capitals, where it was always hoped that Georgia could play a more positive role in regional issues. In the Caucasus itself the Governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan remain somewhat baffled and cautious about developments in Georgia. In the run up to the elections the two governments had failed to open proper lines of communication with the Georgian Dream opposition, fearing that they would upset President Saakashvili. The votes of the Armenian

and Azerbaijani minorities were dutifully delivered to the ruling party with a nod and a wink from Baku and Yerevan. This perhaps will be the last time that this will happen.

All sides now need to reach out to each other. The region desperately needs regional co-operation and Georgia can play an important role in facilitating this. It will not be easy, and if the past is any experience, it can even be unpleasant. However the benefits for Georgia in becoming a regional hub are enormous, and it will also add a lot to its political kudos.

This is however not a one way affair. Georgia has problems of its own with its large neighbour Russia. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan need to weigh in to help normalise relations between Georgia and Russia. There is a win-win situation in this for everybody – even if the major problems such as that of the unrecognised entities remain unresolved for some time to come.

Georgia's dealings with its own Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities need to become more sophisticated, and less patronising. This is a sensitive issue for Georgia but it is now time to bring these communities properly within the political process, not through symbolic actions but through proper empowerment.

The election campaign has shown just how determined and resourceful is Bidzhina Ivanishvili. Those who thought of him as simply a rich man now need to reassess their evaluation. Ivanishvili is much more than that. He is a phenomena that has hit Georgia like a storm, and can do likewise for the region, shuffling all the certainties of the past. Ivanishvili needs to take the bull by the horns on the issue of regional relations and show that he means business. There are things Georgia can do unilaterally without waiting for anybody else. Ivanishvili should move fast to build relations with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and they on their part should welcome this and respond with equal enthusiasm. ■

This comment was contributed by Dennis Sammut, Executive Director of LINKS.

Caucasus Elections Watch is a specialised weekly publication focusing on elections related processes in the Caucasus, with news and analysis compiled by experts with long experience of the region.

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LINKS was established in London in July 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, think tank, working on areas of conflict and conflict prevention, governance, global security and international relations. Over 15 years it has implemented a wide range of activities in support of its basic aims: the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the promotion of democracy in societies in transition, working most of the time through innovative, ground breaking projects. Around 500 events in more than 30 countries were organised.

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Tbilisi

Repeat elections were held in 11 precincts in 3 electoral constituencies of Georgia after the Central Elections Commission had cancelled the vote held there on 1 October. As a result of the new vote majoritarian candidates for the Georgian Dream coalition have won the three seats. The new parliament will therefore be made up of 85 members from the Georgian Dream coalition and 65 members from the United National Movement.

The CEC published the following preliminary results of the repeat elections

No. 13 Signaghi election district, precinct No. 5:

Gela Gelashvili
(Bidzina Ivanishvili - Georgian Dream) - **85,97%**

Levan Bezhashvili
(United National Movement - More Benefits to the People) - **14,03%**

No.32 Gori election district, precinct No. 4:

Malkhaz Vakhtangashvili
(Bidzina Ivanishvili - Georgian Dream) - **91,9%**

Giorgi Tatishvili
(United National Movement - More Benefits to the People) - **7,41%**

No. 35 Khashuri election district, precincts No. 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 13, 45 and 46:

Valeri Gelashvili
(Bidzina Ivanishvili - Georgian Dream) - **93,6%**

Sergo Kitiashvili
(United National Movement - More Benefits to the People) - **3,9%**

Tbilisi

In the first major speech since he has been nominated as new Chairman of the Georgian Parliament, the Chairman of the Republican Party, David Usupashvili told a conference in Tbilisi on 15 October that the Georgian Dream Coalition and the United National Movement should not be allowed to take the roles of "moral inquisitor" and "oppressed democrat".



Speaking at a Conference at the Tbilisi Marriott Hotel, Usupashvili said that the government has a duty to investigate past crimes and the public demand this. But the process needs to be done through an independent court system. Usupashvili said that the National Movement cannot seriously talk about being oppressed given the difficult political process of the last years and the far from satisfactory way that they managed the elections.

Usupashvili said that he wanted to see a separation between government business and party politics and that the new government wanted to encourage a multi-party system and not a one party system. ■

Oskanian case can backfire against Armenian authorities

After his political immunity was formally revoked in parliament at the beginning of October, former Foreign Minister and prominent opposition politician, Vartan Oskanian, was officially charged on 8 October with the misappropriation of \$1.4 million donated by U.S. philanthropist, John Hunstman Sr. to the Civilitas Foundation, a think tank Oskanian founded in 2008.

The news was not well received by the international community. U.S. Ambassador John Heffern called the charges in a video statement he released last week “bad for justice and for democracy in Armenia.” He continued that the case “appears to represent the selective application of Armenian law.” The timing of which, he thought might have something to do with the upcoming “election schedule” in Armenia. A coincidence he found “troubling.”

Heffern concluded by urging “the Government of Armenia to live up to its commitments to the systematic, fair, and transparent implementation of the rule of law.”

Ambassador Heffern’s concerns were echoed by Axel Fischer, Rapporteur for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) to Armenia. “This is especially worrying in the light of the persistent allegations that political motives have played a role in the charges that are levied against him,” stressed the PACE rapporteur.

Furthermore, Fischer underscored that, “If substantiated, these allegations would mean a step backwards from the positive trend with regard to political normalisation that we have witnessed over the last year and a half.”

In response, spokesperson of the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) and Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, Eduard Sharmazanov, stated that “this is a legal matter and it is impermissible to politicise this matter.”

“I do not share the view in the Honourable Ambassador [Heffern’s] statement that this is a selective application of the law,” commented Sharmazanov. “I believe the ambassadors themselves likewise must refrain from politicising the legal matters in Armenia and linking them to elections. The Armenian authorities’ battle is not against individuals, but against bad phenomena,” explained the ruling party spokesperson.

Oskanian denies any wrong-doing and has refused to fight the legal battle in court, dismissing the entire endeavour as political persecution. The lawmaker and the Prosperous

Armenian Party (PAP) have repeatedly called these charges an attempt to pressure the PAP, the second strongest party in the National Assembly into supporting the ruling party’s incumbent president, Serzh Sargsyan, in next February’s elections.

In an interview with the German newspaper, *Die Welle*, Oskanian labelled the charges as not only an attack against himself, but also against his party and democracy in general.

“Armenia is preparing for presidential elections, and I am a member of a party that, if [it] participates, may prove to be a serious [challenge] to the ruling party,” elaborated the former Foreign Minister to *Die Welle*.

Rumours have also been circulating as to Oskanian’s intent to challenge Sargsyan in next year’s presidential elections.

Shortly after the charges were announced, Oskanian revealed in an interview with CivilNet TV (the media branch of Civilitas Foundation) that he would be ready to take up the challenge if his party desired it. “It is natural that the first choice as candidate should be the party’s [the PAP] leader Gagik Tsarukyan. However, if Mr. Tsarukyan decides that he doesn’t want to be a candidate and the party decides on my candidacy, I am ready to assume this responsibility,” said Oskanian.

According to Hmayak Hovanisian, the Oskanian case will test “whether the PAP has the will not to bow to the government pressure and to remain an independent party.” Hovannisian also added that the case against Oskanian, instead of intimidating the PAP is enabling Oskanian to build an image of himself as “an unjustly persecuted politician” and potentially attract a greater share of the vote.

Yervand Bozoyan, an independent political analyst in Armenia, agrees with Hovanisian that the actions taken against Oskanian might actually serve to work in his favour. In an interview with *armenianow.com*, Bozoyan explained that by playing the victim card, “Oskanian, in fact, gets cleansed from his sin of justifying the actions of the authorities during the March 1, 2008 riots, and it also raises his rating to make him a plausible candidate to be nominated in the presidential elections.”

Oskanian is generally considered to be an honest and clean politician in Armenia. In trying to eliminate Oskanian from the Presidential race before it started the Armenian government may have thought it had got rid of a problem. It may yet find out that it had created one. ■

Report prepared for CEW by Karina Gould with additional reporting from Armenian media sources.

Georgia's "historic moment" Washington cautiously welcomes developments in Georgia

A week after Georgia's historic peaceful transfer of power in its 1 October parliamentary elections, U.S. experts, while commending the successes of the former soviet state, were hesitant to provide too much praise, noting that it takes more than an election to make a democracy.

Speaking at the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based think tank on 9 October, Thomas Melia, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, who led an Inter-Agency US government Task Force to Georgia prior to the elections, together with Kenneth Wollack the President of the National Democratic Institute, and Damon Wilson, Executive Vice President of the Atlantic Council shared their thoughts on the conduct of the elections, their significance and what's next for democracy in Georgia.

The election, the speakers reminded, is still not officially over. There are recounts and re-casting of ballots taking place. Moreover, due to some of the cabinet choices made by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the leader of the Georgian Dream, there will also be by-elections. Furthermore, they contended that the election cannot be properly reviewed until the new government takes office and a complete transfer of power has occurred.

While there was mention of problems in the run up to the 1 October election, the fact of the matter remains that there was indeed a peaceful transfer of power, the first to occur in Georgia and a landmark for the post-soviet bloc.

"We saw democracy in action – it was messy, it was a little dirty but the Georgian people had a credible choice where they faced distinct alternatives," said Wilson.



"We have a remarkable transition".

Thomas Melia, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour.

The Atlantic Council VP emphasised that this represents "a significant step forward" for the country. The fact that President Saakashvili conceded his party's defeat and accepted the will of the Georgian people, noted Wilson, reinforces both his own and the country's democratic credentials - an important factor that "gives Tbilisi's actions a boost to aspirations to join NATO, move closer to the EU and overcome geography."

Kenneth Wollack, the President of NDI, said that if Charles Dickens had written a novel about Georgia's campaign this summer and autumn, it would have been called "A Tale of Two Elections." As Thomas Melia of the U.S. State Department, was even more explicit, saying that a month ago "I thought the prospect of violence on election night or the day after was quite real."

So what happened to enable this polarised campaign environment into a competitive election? According to both Wollack and Melia, the Georgian authorities, civil society and the opposition made significant efforts to build public trust, and worked together on key issues. They both highlighted the Inter-Agency Task Force, the Voters' List Verification Commission and the Must-Carry/Must-Offer legislation as major

milestones on the route to democracy. The government led by Saakashvili, expanded Melia, was, despite notable exceptions, generally willing to implement recommendations to pave the way for democratic elections.

Wollack also noted the significant role played by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the leader of the opposition. Ivanishvili was able to unite the opposition and inject significant financial resources into the coalition to mount a viable campaign against the government. For the first time, noted the NDI president, Georgians felt they had access to sufficient information about all political parties as a result of a mix of diverse campaign events held around the country and a plurality of media made accessible through the must-carry/must-offer legislation.

The biggest game changer according to Wollack, however, was the prisoner abuse scandal that broke onto the scene in the final week of the campaign. NDI carried out a series of polls over the past year and Wollack's organisation felt that this scandal had a particularly strong impact on the undecided voters. Georgian society is very conservative, he said, and the scandal created a sense of "collective shame" which many Georgians felt "undermined the global image of Georgia, and in their view hurt their aspirations to join NATO and the EU." The scandal undermined the government's rhetoric of reform in Georgia and reinforced the critiques Ivanishvili was making of the ruling United National Movement (UNM).

All three speakers emphasised the need to turn, what Wollack called, the "poisonous vitriolic rhetoric" of the campaigns and media outlets of both camps into a conciliatory tone that will emphasise both the willingness and the ability of the

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President and the new Parliament to work together. An important theme stressed by all speakers was fact that there will be a year of co-habitation between a UNM president and a Georgian Dream parliament ahead of next year’s presidential elections.

Wilson explained that the upcoming year will be the real test of Georgian democracy. It will be the time for the winners to demonstrate that they can govern the nation and work with their former adversaries. Ivanishvili’s retraction of his call for Saakashvili to resign was seen as “spot on” by Wilson who believes that it is a demonstration of the Georgian Dream’s desire to help foster a culture of playing politics by the rules.

The Atlantic Council Vice President hoped that Ivanishvili will now turn his attention to governance. By this he means reforming those institutions that need attention, but not destroying the positive changes that were made under the UNM government. The Georgian Dream, he said, has a “responsibility to protect” those institutions that were successfully reformed, such as the police force, under the UNM government.

The discussion left the distinct impression that what the future holds for Georgia is very unclear. There is a lot of possibility and much optimism. It is now on the shoulders of Georgia’s political leaders to continue moving forward on the trajectory of democracy. This, however, will require political maturity, compromise and respect.

Nevertheless, as Melia pointed out, up until this point “we have a remarkable transition.” ■

Report prepared for CEW by Karina Gould

Georgian Dream win three more seats after repeat elections in 11 precincts

Following complaints raised by the Georgian Dream coalition and Georgian NGOs, particularly the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy and Transparency International Georgia, the Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC) held repeat elections in eleven precincts on 14 October.

The initial results in these electoral precincts were annulled due to serious electoral violations.

The repeat elections will determine the winners of three single-mandate constituencies: Signagi, Gori and Khashuri.

The tight race between the former director of the State Audit Service, Levan Bezhuashvili of the United National Movement (UNM) and Gela Gelashvili of the Georgian Dream was determined in Gelashvili’s favour as a result of the repeat election in precinct No. 5 of Signagi in the Kakheti region. Preliminary results from the CEC after the 1 October poll had shown the UNM candidate in the lead with 48.01 percent of the vote against 47.89 percent for Gelashvili. Transparency International Georgia subsequently published a ballot return from precinct 5 showing that the count had been tampered with.

Precinct No. 4 in Gori also held a repeat election that overturned the initial result which determined the victory of Malkhaz Vakhtangashvili of the Georgian Dream.

The constituency which will saw the most repeat elections on Sunday was the single-mandate constituency of Khashuri in the Shida Kartli region where voters in nine precincts were asked to vote again.

The town of Khashuri was the site of severe electoral violations where masked men were caught on tape entering polling stations and allegedly altering the final vote count. The principle contestants in the Khashuri race were Sergo Kitiashvili of the United National Movement and Valery Gelashvili of the Georgian Dream. Kitiashvili, however, announced Sunday that he will be withdrawing from the race due to “pressure” and “aggression” inflicted against his staffers and the local CEC staff by the Georgian Dream’s campaign team and supporters. Gelashvili has denied any wrongdoing. The UNM candidate’s name still appeared on the ballot, however, as his withdrawal was announced on the same day as the repeat polls. This race had originally been reported as the most tightly contested, with Gelashvili obtaining 45.81 percent of the votes and Kitiashvili with 45.2 percent, according to CEC data. After the re-run of the elections on 14 October in precincts No. 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 13, 45, and 46 Gelashvili emerged as the clear winner.

There will also be three by-elections related to Georgian Dream candidates who were appointed to cabinet positions last week. The by-elections, however, will take place in one year, in accordance with the Electoral Code of Georgia. They will occur in one of the Tbilisi districts, Baghdati district and Samtredia, in order to replace Tea Tsulukia who was named Minister of Justice, Archil Kbilashvili who was appointed as Chief Prosecutor and Kakhi Kaladze, who will become the Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure. ■

Scandal over buying of parliamentary seats continues to resonate in Azerbaijan with the emergence of a second video

A second video has surfaced in the seat-buying scandal that emerged at the end of September in Azerbaijan implicating a prominent governing party Member of Parliament, Gular Ahmadova, in an attempt to sell a seat in the Milli Majliss, the Parliament of Azerbaijan, to the former rector of the Azerbaijan International University, Elshad Abdullayev.



The second video was sent to Azadliq, an opposition newspaper, on 8 October by Mr. Abdullayev in an attempt to demonstrate that this was not an isolated incident and Ms. Ahmadova was not acting alone as insinuated by several lead members of the governing New Azerbaijan Party (YAP). Rather, the exiled Azerbaijani academic hoped this video would show the pervasiveness in Azerbaijan of fixing the parliament through bribery. Abdullayev informed Azadliq that following the statements made by the governing YAP and its supporters indicating the uniqueness of this event, he wanted to make it clear that his experience was by no means an isolated incident.

In the second video, which appears to be a continuation of the same meeting as that of the initial footage, several key political figures are named in the seat-selling scheme. These include former ministers Farhad Aliyev and Ali Insanov, as well as the current Minister of Emergency Situations, Kamaladdin Heydarov, the head of the Presidential Administration Ramiz Mehdiyev and even incumbent President Ilham Aliyev and his wife, the First Lady, Mehriban Aliyeva.

Since the original video was released, Ms. Ahmadova has resigned her seat in parliament and had her YAP membership suspended, and is under investigation by the Baku City Prosecutor's Office for alleged bribery under Article 178.3.2 of the Criminal Code of Azerbaijan. Ms. Ahmadova's seat will go to a by-election, though the Central Election Commission has not provided specific details about when or how the by-election will take place.

Some opposition critics are saying that Ms. Ahmadova is being used as a scapegoat in an attempt to cover up pervasive corrupt practices within the ruling party. The opposition Public Chamber is attempting to rally support behind this issue and is calling for greater transparency from the government. However, the government has rejected the Public Chamber's request to organise a protest against this incident in Central Baku.

"They [the Public Chamber] said that their rally will demand the dissolution of the Parliament," said Deputy Chairman and Executive Secretary of the YAP Ali Ahmadov in an interview with trend.az.

"The reason for this [rally] is a scandal over a video with former MP Gular Ahmadova and former rector of the Azerbaijan International University Elshad Abdullayev. This is a completely unjustified reason for the mass action. I think that the public will not support the Public Chamber rally," concluded Ahmadov.

Ahmadov noted that the Public Chamber had been offered a different location to hold their rally, though he did not specify where. ■

Source CEW with Azerbaijani media.

New coalition demands independent judiciary in Georgia



კოალიცია
დამოუკიდებელი
და გამჭვირვალე
მართლმსაჯულებისთვის
Coalition for
an Independent and
Transparent Judiciary

A number of leading Georgian NGOs have established a coalition demanding an independent judiciary. Problems with the judiciary which were perceived as being subservient to the government have often been cited as one of the more serious flaws of the Georgian system. In a statement the organisations stated:

The Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary responds to the crucial developments in Georgia. Georgian public witnessed peaceful transfer of power through elections, which has produced great expectations about conducting democratic processes in a new manner. As public is aware, the process of developing the concept of the so-called Fair Judicial System, including judicial reforms, is ongoing.

We welcome the initiative and hereby, we'd like to note that this process of utmost importance must be conducted with the involvement of civil society as much as possible.

Members of the Coalition include organizations with many years of experience in judicial issues and have concrete views and recommendations about reforms to be carried out.

We believe that consideration of their experience and recommendations will positively contribute to the development of the concept for the judicial reform and will reinforce independence of the judiciary.

We also believe that participation of civil society in elaboration of the concept must be ensured at an earliest stage possible. Therefore, we stand ready to share our views with the parliamentary majority and candidates for relevant ministerial posts in the cabinet. ■

The member organisations of the Coalition for and Independent and Transparent Judiciary

- Article 42 of the Constitution
- Multinational Georgia
- Solidarity to Illegal Prisoners
- Georgia Small and Medium Business Association
- Civil Integration Foundation
- Georgian Lawyers for Independent Profession
- Business and Economic Center
- Liberal Center for Protection of Constitutional Rights
- International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy
- Association Green Wave
- The Union "21 Century"
- Georgian Young Lawyer's Association
- Human Right Center
- Business Association of Georgia
- International Chamber of Commerce
- Transparency International
- Union of Meskhetian Democrats
- Liberty Institute
- Georgia Bar Association
- Civil Development Agency
- United Nations Association of Georgia
- The European Law Students' Association
- Civil Society Institute
- Open Society Georgia Foundation
- Institute of Democracy
- American Chamber of Commerce
- Association of Civic Initiatives and Employees Defense
- Eurasia Partnership Foundation
- Institute of Development of Freedom of Information
- Tbilisi Media Club
- Human Rights Priority

OSCE Holds Timely Media Freedom Conference in South Caucasus

Speaking in Tbilisi on 11 October, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovi, told participants of the 9th Annual South Caucasus Media Conference that both traditional and new forms of media must “remain free forums of public debate.”

Mijatovi's remarks come amidst the recent arrest of Azerbaijani blogger Zaur Qurbanli as well as this month's parliamentary elections in Georgia which witnessed both a change in government as well as an identity crisis for some pro-government media outlets.

The conference, which included participants from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, is timely considering the pressures of the election season on all media outlets in the three South Caucasus countries this year and next.

“The fundamental human right to freedom of expression and freedom of the media is not only reserved for traditional media, but also covers social media and other forms of new media,” Mijatovi said.

“I constantly urge the governments of all OSCE participating States to foster and not to restrict media freedom both on-line and off-line. Online media can promote diversity and pluralism of opinions and voices. They also support democratic processes and development by providing a direct link between governments and citizens.”

“I will continue to raise with the authorities of the countries in the whole OSCE region including the South Caucasus cases of violence, harassment and even imprisonment of bloggers and journalists, government control over broadcast media and limited access to governmental information,” informed Mijatovi.

In Georgia, traditionally pro-government TV stations as well as the public broadcaster have come under fire recently for the cancellation of popular TV shows and the letting go of several journalists and TV hosts. The Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA) is concerned that the principle host fired, Vakho Sanaia, was let go due to his involvement in the student-led protests against the prisoner-abuse scandal.

In a statement released by the GYLA, they state that it is the public broadcaster's responsibility to provide content that ensures “editorial independence, the fairness and impartiality of [programmes] and guarantee that the latter are free from state, political, religious or commercial influence.” Attributes they state Sanaia's shows, which focus on interesting international developments and Georgia-EU relations, possess.



L-r: Douglas Griffin, Director, Albany Associates; Christian Möller, Expert, Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media; Andrey Rikhter, Director, Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media; and Dunja Mijatovi, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, during the opening of the 9th annual South Caucasus Media Conference, Tbilisi, 11 October 2012. (picture courtesy of the OSCE)

“In this light,” concludes the statement, “it is important to keep the foregoing TV shows on air. We believe that cancelling of shows with social and political content will have an adverse impact on keeping [the] public informed in a timely and comprehensive manner on developments in Georgia and throughout the world. We also believe that it [the cancellation of these shows] will further distance the Public Broadcaster away from fulfilling its obligations.”

The public broadcaster released a statement following the elections detailing its hope that the new Georgian Dream led government will “honourably continue the democratic heritage and not interrupt the activity of free media nor restrict freedom of speech.”

Both Imedi and Rustavi 2 TV stations have made public statements on their intent to act as government watchdogs and contribute to the protection of democratic processes in the country. This move has led some political analysts to speculate over the loosening of the grip the United National Movement, the former governing party of Georgia, holds on these media outlets. ■