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Summary to Roundtable Discussion Election Campaign Amid the Pandemic September 14, 2021

The [International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy](#), the [European Platform for Democratic Elections](#), and the [Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation](#) hosted a roundtable discussion concerning the organization of elections and election campaigning during the ongoing pandemic. What challenges does the election administration face in organizing the 2 October local elections? How has the pandemic impacted the ability and manner in which candidates can conduct their campaign? Has the pandemic created conditions that could make voters more vulnerable to pressure and manipulation? A panel of international as well as Georgian experts and professionals working in election administration discussed these issues during this closed roundtable discussion.

In general, experts have observed recurring trends and issues surrounding the holding of elections during the pandemic. Complications tend to arise when decisions concerning the holding of elections under these unique circumstances are taken without inclusivity and broader political consensus, and when untested measures are used without a country having prior experience in using these, such as introducing alternative voting methods (e.g., early, postal, or e-voting). The successful holding of elections during the pandemic additionally requires good infrastructure, financial investment, and interagency coordination. Based on the year and a half of experience of living with the pandemic and the need to continue holding elections, experts call for election administrations and governments to draw lessons for the future and to prepare in the long-term for innovative solutions for conducting elections.

Election preparations and conduct

Several specific measures have been put in the place by the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia to **ensure the safety of persons working in election administration**, such as providing antigen rapid tests for election commission employees or encouraging vaccinations at all levels of the election commission. Tests are also required for persons attending trainings by election administration. On polling day, election administration will also be authorized to request visitors in buildings of the CEC or at the district level to provide a negative test result to enter the building.

For **voters on polling day**, there will be thermal screening of each person entering the polling station. Voters will be obliged to wear a facemask at a polling station and remove it only twice for face recognition. First time when entering a polling station and second time when being checked by a registrar in a voters list. Law enforcement would be the responsible authority to impose any sanctions on persons who refuse to abide by the rules and in those cases where an election observer or political party proxy does not pass the thermal screening, they can be replaced by another person. Voters will also be given individual pens to use to mark the ballot, and all staff at polling stations will receive face masks and shields as well as disinfection products. To allow for social distancing in polling stations, the CEC decided to change the location of up to 150 polling stations to larger venues, which domestic election observers assessed positively.

In Georgia, there is no history of using **alternative voting methods** and therefore in-person voting at a polling station on Election Day remains the only means of voting for the majority of voters, with some voting by mobile ballot box made possible in specific circumstances. For these and the previous elections held under the pandemic, voting by mobile ballot boxes has been expanded to voters in self-isolation, who can sign up for this service. Experts noted that if any alternative voting methods were to be introduced that this would have to be done as a part of a long-term strategy. There is a need for a broader discussion in



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Georgia on this subject.

In order to inform **voters in self-isolation** about their means of voting, the CEC launched a broad voter education campaign via TV, radio, and social media. Voters in self-isolation can call a specific service number to request voting by mobile ballot box and a special unit is being set up who will be delivering the mobile ballot box to voters. A 'Covid polling station' will also be set up where these votes shall be counted.

It was noted that the dramatic increase in Covid infection and associated death rates in recent weeks have led to more persons considering participating in elections as being a higher personal risk, especially for those working in election administration. However, despite the difficulties and safety concerns of voting during the pandemic, experts are hopeful that **voter turnout** will be similarly high to the turnout for the 2020 parliamentary elections, which was one of the highest in Georgia for many years.

Domestic election observers also face additional challenges to their work during these 'pandemic elections', including that trainings are much harder to conduct, especially when they fall on a period with very strict and intense lockdowns, which was the case in Georgia several weeks ago where public transport was even stopped. Additional safety measures taken or innovative observation and training methods introduced also carry with them high unexpected burdens and costs.

Election campaigning and the media

The pandemic brings with it certain **difficulties for political parties to conduct their campaigns**, as voters avoid larger gathering and in-person campaigning is made more difficult. Political parties have had to adjust their campaign methods, turning to digital and media campaigning. It is unclear how these methods affect voter behavior, but it raises the question of whether voters become more vulnerable to **disinformation** when only receiving information via such sources. Additionally, experts warn that online campaigning also has the danger of creating alternative public opinions which can undermine democracy and democratic institutions. Purely online campaigning may also exclude those voters who are not digitally literate or lack reliable internet access, which is still a considerable number of voters in Georgia.

Although the pandemic exacerbated acute needs of the voters, there has been an extraordinary **absence of political debate** on issues such as health and employment during the election campaign. These issues are also not addressed in a meaningful way in the electoral programs of political parties, who have only now started releasing their programs, a mere three weeks before the election. The media also does not seem to cover these issues. The discourse there focuses on political scandals and only furthers to increase the **political polarization** in the country, stated one participant.

In order to overcome this politically polarizing election environment, experts stated that political parties must move away from this zero-sum competition mindset and move towards a more consensus based politics.

The pandemic and the ruling party

Participants stated that the pandemic has **privileged the ruling party**. During the pandemic, need for urgent social assistance has gone up and the government introduced large scale assistance programs. The ruling party have used these programs as material for their election campaigning to attract voters, which indicates that there is a blurring of the line between the government and the ruling party. This goes against recommendations for electoral good practice as defined in the Copenhagen document.

It was also noted that in such moments of economic crisis and emergency situations, large groups of the



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population and certain segments of the economy become more dependent on the good will of the government. This is especially the case in areas where the government is a major source of employment. This dependence is likely to impact voting behavior and raises the issue of **abuse of administrative resources** by the ruling party.

One expert noted that the pandemic increased state rights at the cost of human rights, where the ruling party had the power to impose measures defined without political consensus and without communicating these openly to the public, but which directly affected a person's rights. It was also noted that the pandemic has been managed inconsistently and used irresponsibly for partisan ends, such as in the fact that there are very few restrictions now, just ahead of the elections, despite the very high infection rates.

Generally, experts stated that during the 2020 parliamentary elections the election administration was able to conduct the elections in a safe environment. It is yet to be seen what the situation will be like in these elections, which are taking place during very high infection rates and still relatively low vaccination rates among the population.

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