

Georgia: Challenges and uncertainties for 2020

Georgia is gearing up for parliamentary elections in October 2020. The 'Georgian Dream' party, in charge since 2012, has strived to implement the reforms called for in the Association Agreement with the EU. However, the government has failed to fulfil its promise on electoral reforms and is facing mounting opposition. The High Representative (HR/VP) is expected to make a statement on Georgia during the March I plenary part-session.

Background: Georgia's path towards reforms

Georgia is a key [strategic partner](#) for the EU in the South Caucasus. The country is a member of the Eastern Partnership and signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, [including](#) a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area which held out the prospect of visa liberalisation (obtained in 2017) in return for key economic and political reforms. Georgia is, for instance, [committed](#) to rolling back years of massive economic deregulation and to improving the independence and transparency of its judiciary. On this latter point, the EU has helped [establish](#) a 'Government Legal Aid Service' and trained thousands of public officials. So far, Georgia has made [some progress](#) on these reforms, although the European Commission noted in its 2019 [assessment](#) that this progress still needs to be [consolidated](#) in many areas, such as a more [transparent](#) system for appointing judges. Moreover, political polarisation is [challenging](#) this progress.

Recent political developments

The last six months have seen increased opposition to the governing pro-Western Georgian Dream party and its leader, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, amid growing concerns of democratic [backsliding](#) and declining trust in the government. Large-scale protests broke out in June 2019, with the crowds [violently](#) dispersed by the authorities. In November, the parliament [scuttled](#) plans for electoral reform, which had been [announced](#) to placate the protests. This triggered a [second wave](#) of demonstrations directed at Ivanishvili, who is [suspected](#) of having orchestrated this setback. The current electoral system, a mix of first-past-the-post constituencies and proportional representation, is widely [seen](#) to favour the ruling party. Georgian Dream currently holds a super-majority in parliament, and remains the largest party, although its support has been [dwindling](#) in recent months. Ivanishvili's attitude has largely been one of doubling down since the protests. A [ruling](#) by the European Court of Human Rights in June 2019 allowed one of his close associates to [reacquire](#) the largest opposition TV channel in Georgia. When the millionaire banker Mamuka Khazaradze [announced](#) his intention to enter politics in opposition to Georgian Dream the following month, he rapidly found himself [accused](#) of money-laundering. Additionally, Giorgi Gakharia, who had been Minister of the Interior during the June protests and who [had faced](#) calls for resignation, was instead [promoted](#) to Prime Minister in September. The government risks further protests this year, particularly since President Zourabichvili [confirmed](#) that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will attend a Council of Europe summit in Tbilisi in May this year.

The European Parliament and Georgia

The European Parliament encourages the implementation of the Association Agreement through the [EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee](#). The Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group ([DEG](#)) also lists Georgia as a priority country and proposes support activities for 2020, including a fact-finding mission and launching a dialogue process between government and opposition. Parliament has also repeatedly drawn attention to the need for continued [judiciary reforms](#), as well as to Russia's [illegal occupation](#) and recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The latest annual implementation report for the Association Agreement is expected to be completed late this year.

Statement by the HR/VP: [2020/2522\(RSP\)](#).

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