



The Cambridge Security Initiative

## **GEORGIA FACES CONTINUED INSTABILITY AS ELECTIONS NEAR**

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As 2019 draws to a close, anti-government protests in Georgia continue apace. In mid-December a protest group, Shame, released a foul-smelling chemical in parliament as legislators were deliberating a series of lifetime appointments to the Supreme Court. Claiming responsibility for the attack in a [Facebook post](#), the group used the hashtag #Systemstinks. A number of Georgia's international partners have expressed concern about the political turmoil, warning that the country is at risk of democratic backsliding. Both the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Union were critical of the Supreme Court appointments, drawing attention to the lack of transparency in the process.

Georgian politics has become increasingly polarised, and the country's continued democratic development is at risk. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) coalition, led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, backtracked on a promise to reform the country's electoral system. The existing system, a mix of proportional representation and single-mandate majoritarian constituencies, is perceived to unfairly favour the ruling party: GD holds over 75 per cent of seats in the current parliament despite winning only 48 per cent of the national vote in 2016.

There are concerns about GD's dominance of political life, as well as the extent of Ivanishvili's continued influence (but lack of accountability) on the government and Georgia's political process. Moves to pack the Supreme Court with GD appointees, as well as tightening state control over the media, have prompted further unease about attempts to stifle any political dissent in the run-up to the 2020 parliamentary elections. The GD government is beginning to resemble its own portrayal of the United National Movement (UNM) government led by Mikheil Saakashvili, which it ousted in 2012: GD's campaign narrative seven years ago depicted the country as dominated by a small circle of men centred around a leader who controlled all economic, political, and media resources, and stifled opposition.

### **OUTLOOK**

GD came to power in 2012, marking an important milestone in Georgia's post-Soviet development, as the first peaceful and democratic electoral transfer of leadership. However, political instability continues to threaten the country's fragile democratic development, raising questions about its future strategic direction. As it heads into an election year, Georgia faces a significant challenge moving forward and needs to guard against domestic backsliding, which would undermine its long-held aspirations of integration into the Euro-Atlantic community.