

THE USE OF PERSONAL DATA IN GEORGIAN POLITICS



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Introduction

It comes as no surprise that companies use many different advertising tools and tactics to sell their products. But not many people are aware that the same techniques that the marketing industry uses are also employed by politicians. A group of researchers at Tactical Tech and their partners have identified more than 500 companies all over the world involved in the “influence industry” — the business of using personal data in elections.

Politicians have three main goals when they work with data:



to collect data



to learn more about voters



and to influence them

To obtain that data, political parties often use official campaign apps, buy data, and sometimes even get it for free from the commercial sector. This puts parties in an unequal position, because those with more money or contacts can get their hands on more data. This data lets politicians know what voters like or dislike and what kind of messages they are more sensitive to. “Digital listening,” for example, is often used by politicians to analyze huge amounts of data that we share on social media. Eventually, all this data serves to influence voters and their decisions using a variety of means – from robocalls to mobile texting to advanced TV targeting.

This report looks at how this collection, analysis, and use of personal data takes place in elections in Georgia. To answer this question, we carried out a 6-month study observing the pre-election period in Georgia 2020 and conducted interviews with experts after the elections. It is worth noting that the severe political crisis that has followed the 2020 Parliamentary elections significantly hindered the study: many pre-agreed interviews could not take place as the political parties had been involved in ongoing protests, boycott, and mediated negotiations during the study¹.

¹ What you need to know about Georgian Political Crisis, POLITICO, accessible at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/what-you-need-to-know-georgia-political-crisis-giorgi-gakharia/>

Background Information

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia started its journey toward democratization. Despite the country's aspirations toward democracy and Euro-Atlantic institutions, the country has failed several times on the way to fully realise this vision. As a result, what Georgians have created in the last three decades of trying to craft democracy lacks the qualities of a sound democracy: Georgia is often regarded as a country in the 'grey zone': neither dictatorial nor truly democratic.² An open letter by international experts describes how:

“Georgia deserves high praise as the frontrunner among the Eastern Partnership countries. Significant progress was made with democratic reforms, crucial to its long-standing transatlantic agenda. For example, the 2012 elections resulted in a peaceful government transition for the first time in the South Caucasus’ history, exemplifying how a post-Soviet state can escape the Russian sphere of influence.”³

Since 2012, Georgia has been governed by the Georgian Dream – the coalition movement led by the millionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who served as the first prime minister of the country after gaining power in 2012. Over the years he was believed to govern the country from behind the scenes.⁴ In early 2021, after the Georgian Dream proclaimed victory in the 2020 Parliamentary elections, Ivanishvili announced that he was quitting politics, as the party had gained the victory and would not be threatened for the next 4-5 years.

However, these most recent elections in the country also sparked another political crisis which, as of March 2021, still remains unresolved. The 2020 parliamentary elections have been assessed by the NGO sector as “the least democratic and free among the elections held under

² The Role of Media in Political Changes of Emerging Democracies, Nino Macharashvili, 2012, accessible at: https://www.academia.edu/3320610/The_Role_of_Media_in_Political_Changes_of_Emerging_Democracies

³ Open letter of international experts' community on the current situation in Georgia, accessible at: <https://www.europeanvalues.cz/en/open-letter-of-international-experts-community-on-the-current-situation-in-georgia/>

⁴ Fundamental freedoms respected in competitive Georgian elections, but allegations of pressure and blurring of line between party and state reduced confidence, international observers say, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2020, accessible at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/469017>

the Georgian Dream government.”⁵ The election was evaluated as flawed but ultimately legitimate by international observers.⁶ However, this evaluation has not been accepted by the majority of the opposition parties, who have consequently rejected the election results as fraudulent and given up their parliamentary seats.⁷

Amid this political boycott, the Georgian police broke into the offices of the United National Movement (UNM) opposition party to arrest UNM leader Nika Melia on what his team says are politically motivated charges. Prior to this arrest, Georgia’s prime minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned, as his team could not reach a consensus regarding Melia’s arrest. The position was given to the former Defense Minister Irakli Garibashvili, who finalized the Georgian Dream’s plan of arresting the opposition leader.⁸

Since then, the European Union has led the negotiations between the ruling and opposition parties to deescalate the political crisis. However, the first round of week-long negotiations turned out to be unsuccessful after the second visit of European Council President Charles Michel’s personal envoy to Georgia in an attempt to find a solution to the ongoing political crisis jeopardizing the country’s long-lasting European aspirations.⁹

⁵ NGOs assessment of the 2020 parliamentary elections, TI Georgia, 2020, accessible at: <https://transparency.ge/en/post/ngos-assessment-2020-parliamentary-elections>

⁶ Experts react: What’s behind the crisis in Georgia? Atlantic Council, 2021, accessible at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/experts-react-whats-behind-the-crisis-in-georgia/>

⁷ Opposition parties in Georgia sign joint statement renouncing their seats in parliament, JAMnews2020, accessible at: <https://jam-news.net/georgia-document-nika-melia-opposition-parliament-boycott-national-movement-lelo/>

⁸ Ivanishvili Says He’s Leaving Georgian Politics For Good. His Critics Have Heard That One Before. Radio Liberty, 2021, accessible at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-ivanishvili-leaving-politics-ruling-party/31043818.html>

⁹ EU envoy heads back to Georgia to continue mediation, EURACTIV, 2021, accessible at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/eu-envoy-heads-back-to-georgia-to-continue-mediation/>

Georgian Data Leaks

Methods of influencing voters
using data

LEAK OF VOTER DATA



In case of a poorly secured digital infrastructure, **voter data is often stolen by cybercriminals.**

This information is **an important resource for political campaigns**, however, when obtained illegally, it can lead to liabilities for a political party.



The most notable role of personal data during the election campaign in advance of this political turmoil was a large data leak. In March 2020, seven months before Georgia’s parliamentary elections, the online portal ZDNet published an article entitled [Personal details for the entire country of Georgia published online](https://www.zdnet.com/article/personal-details-for-the-entire-country-of-georgia-published-online), which stated that a file containing personal information for almost 5 million Georgians had been published on a hacker forum. The leak was discovered by Data Breach Monitoring and Prevention Service - Under the Breach (<https://underthebreach.com>) who informed the ZDNet portal. Initially the portal reported that the leak was coming from Georgia’s Central Election Commission (CEC), however the information was updated a few days after the commission’s denial that the data originated from its servers, as it contained information that is not usually collected by the CEC.¹⁰

პიადი #	გვარი	სახელი	მამის სახელი	დაბ. თარიღი	reg. თარიღი	DMONAC	სქესი	მომცობის #	quCa	რაიონი
0100				6/8/1933	9/12/2005	d	1		Tbilisi gldani III m/r kor. 72 b. 1	gidani
0100				7/28/1970		a	1		Tbilisi gldani IIIa m/r kor. 21 b.	gidani
0100				8/23/1941		b	2		Tbilisi gldani IV m/r kor. 95 b. 27	gidani
0100				3/7/1939		g	2		Tbilisi gldani IIIa m/r kor. 16 b.	gidani
0100				8/4/1974		d	2		Tbilisi gldani IIIa m/r kor. 16 b.	gidani
0100				4/9/1949	11/10/2010	a	1		Tbilisi gldani III m/r kor. 10 b. 1	gidani
0100				12/19/1934		b	2		Tbilisi gldani III m/r kor. 8 b. 39	gidani
0100				8/27/1928	2/2/2010	g	2		Tbilisi gldani a m/r kor. 52 b. 39	gidani
0100				4/25/1929		a	1		Tbilisi gldani I m/r kor. 3 b. 48	gidani
0100				12/5/1957	9/18/2006	a	2		Tbilisi gldani I m/r kor. 3 b. 48	gidani
0100				1/15/1943		b	2		Tbilisi gldani I m/r kor. 18 b. 102	gidani
0100				3/29/1937	2/26/2008	g	1		Tbilisi gldani II m/r kor. 31 b. 13	gidani
0100				3/5/1934	2/16/2009	g	2		Tbilisi gldani VII m/r kor. 12 b. 9	gidani
0100				1/1/1932		a	2		Tbilisi gldanis das. k. moretis q. N	gidani

Image: ZDNet

When the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Lab researchers analyzed the dataset, they found that the file was created in August 2011. It appears that the file was leaked around the same year, but was only published nine years later. The file contained Georgian citizens’ ID numbers, last names, first names, father’s names, dates of birth, registration dates, sex, card numbers, addresses, and regions. The database was verified to be authentic, however, it also contained information about deceased citizens, such as those born in 1880. In addition, the dataset contained data entries of Georgians under the age of 18. These details support the CEC statement that the original source of the file could not have been the CEC. As DFRLab researchers concluded,

¹⁰ Personal details for the entire country of Georgia published online, ZDNet, 2020, accessible at: <https://www.zdnet.com/article/personal-details-for-the-entire-country-of-georgia-published-online>

“while the leaked dataset dates to 2011, it could be used for various nefarious purposes, including privacy breaches, identity theft, and election-related intimidation. Even if the leaked data in itself is useless for influencing elections, the fact that it was circulated in the first place may raise serious perception problems and impact Georgians’ trust in democratic processes.”¹¹

The leaked data suggests that there are actors trying to disrupt processes, and potentially to specifically create distrust in certain institutions.

Fake Deepfakes

Deepfakes can be considered one of the emerging technologies with the most potential to negatively affect political processes. These are computer-generated videos that depict people and voices resembling their counterparts in reality. With such a tool, political parties could potentially create synthetic videos that convincingly represent politicians saying things they never said.

NEWS

Ruling party: opposition has plans to release deepfakes on election day



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The ruling Georgian Dream party has warned voters regarding deepfake videos which may go viral on election day. Photo: Georgian Dream press office.

[Comments](#)

Image: Agenda.ge

¹¹ GeorgiaLeaks: Data from 2011 causes confusion in 2020, DFRLab, 2020, accessible at: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgialeaks-data-from-2011-causes-confusion-in-2020-54c9e0add6d2>

A few days before the elections, the ruling party Georgian Dream announced that the “radical opposition” had plans to release deepfake videos on election day.¹² Executive secretary of Georgian Dream Irakli Kobakhidze stated that the fake videos depicting members of the ruling party, including party founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, may be placed on the internet in an effort to mislead the voters. He also said that the ruling party had no detailed information on exactly what kind of fake videos might go viral. The opposition party members from the United National Movement did not consider these allegations seriously and claimed that the ruling party were only making such claims because the election day was approaching. The 2020 parliamentary elections apparently passed by without any deepfake videos being released, and this time the claims about deepfakes turned out to be fake.

¹² Ruling party: opposition has plans to release deepfakes on election day, Agenda.ge, 2020, accessible at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/3319>

Robocalls & mobile texting

Methods of influencing voters
using data

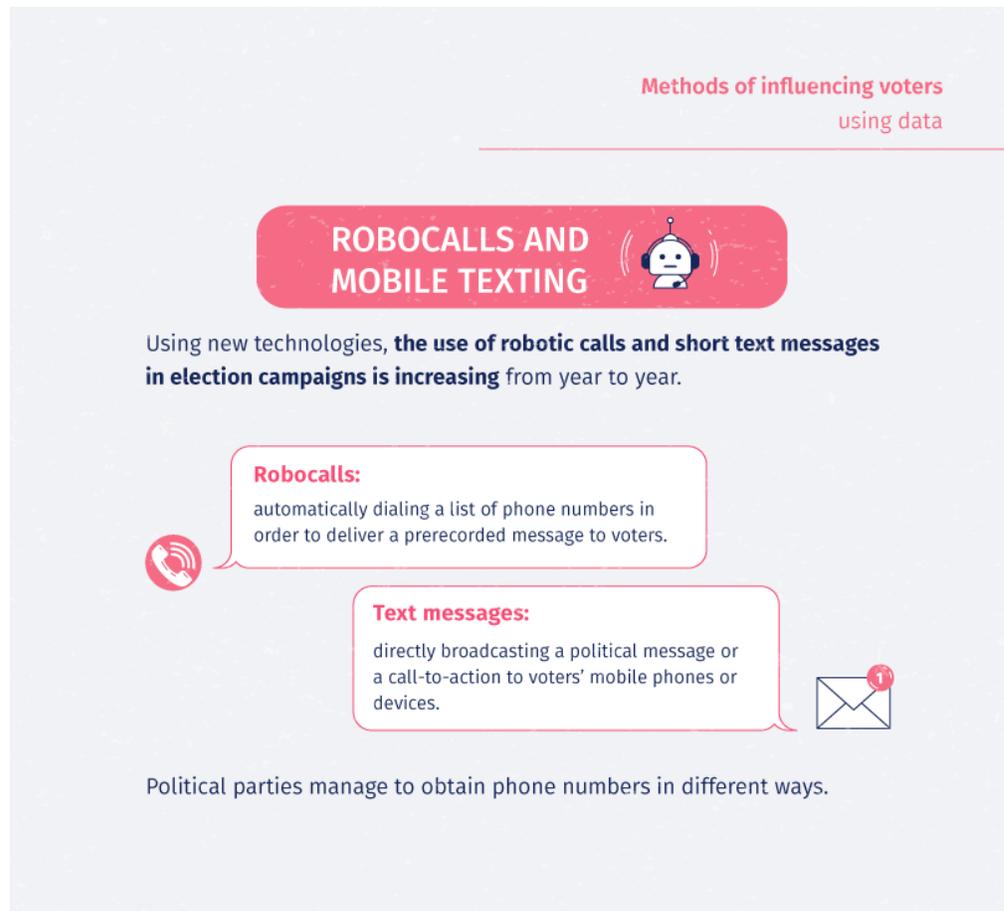
ROBOCALLS AND MOBILE TEXTING

Using new technologies, **the use of robotic calls and short text messages in election campaigns is increasing** from year to year.

Robocalls:
automatically dialing a list of phone numbers in order to deliver a prerecorded message to voters. 

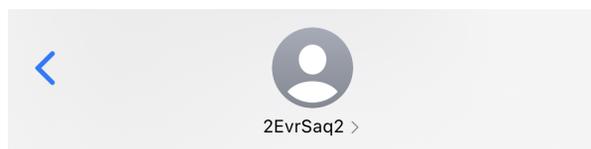
Text messages:
directly broadcasting a political message or a call-to-action to voters' mobile phones or devices. 

Political parties manage to obtain phone numbers in different ways.



Robocalls and mobile texting first appeared predominantly in the 2018 Presidential election in Georgia. Mobile texting was used by the ruling party and one opposition candidate –Giorgi Vashadze. The ruling party also used small-scale robocalls in the 2018 presidential election when the party founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, “called” numerous voters and urged them to support their nominee Salome Zurbishvili in the elections.

Since then, robocalls and mobile texting have become more prevalent in the Georgian elections. During the 2020 parliamentary elections, almost all parties have been using these methods.



Tue, 20 Oct, 17:22

xval, 21 oqtombers, mteli dge, kvela kalakshi, DAUPIPINE BIDZINAS. Kulminacia 20:00 biznes-centrtan. Miaci bidzinas signali, rom misi dro amoiwura NO91018 Saq2

Thu, 22 Oct, 19:46

Ocnebam chaaflava pandemiaze reagireba. Ocnebisgan gansxvavebit, ixile ras gavaketebt 1 noembridan. Evropuli Saqartvelo - <https://bit.ly/3dQ3AID> NO91018 Saq2

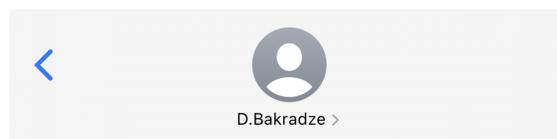
Thu, 29 Oct, 13:06

Ocneba pirveli turis mere xalxis isev gamoketvas apirebs. Modi archevnebze! Magrad davamarcxot rom ar gamouvidet! Shemoxaze 2- Evropuli Saqartvelo NO91018 Saq2



Text Message
Thu, 29 Oct, 11:41

KAXABER DZAGANIA- patriotta aliansi. Saburtalos archevani. SHEMOXAZE 8! NO SMS-91130



Text Message
Fri, 30 Oct, 15:47

Sheni xma gadamckvetia! Evropuli Saqartvelo=cvlilebebs, dzlier gunds, scor xedvas, ocnebis marcxs da uars ertpirovnul mmartvelobaze! Shemoxaze 2 NO91018 Saq2

Images: Nino Macharashvili, 2020

However, these calls and messages do not seem to be targeted: In some cases, they reached people who weren't even eligible to vote, or those who were registered in different electoral precincts.

SMS marketing is quite well-developed and easily accessible in Georgia. Thus, it is believed that the political parties use these services and reach the potential voters through them, rather than owning and processing the voters' data themselves, and using the robocalls and messages as targeted communication methods.

Discussion

Out of 12 of the main global data-driven campaign methodologies¹³, few have been used actively in Georgian elections. This can be explained by the following factors:

1. Lack of data infrastructure in the country

Georgia is still developing data infrastructure - while certain marketing and digital agencies have attempted to run data-driven campaigns, the nation-wide datasets are still not collectively available. Thus, it is not that easy to employ data-driven methodologies in election campaigns.

2. Size of the country and its population

When it comes to investing in data infrastructure or data-driven election campaign methodologies, it might not make sense for the political parties as the country is so small with most people in the capital: the total number of voters in Georgia, as of late 2020, was 3,501,931 people.¹⁴ While the digital services and internet penetration is not underdeveloped in Georgia, the size of the country and voters' pool still encourages political parties to concentrate on old-fashioned methods such as door-to-door canvassing rather than building a digital infrastructure around voters' data.

3. Use of traditional methods to influence elections

The Georgian political landscape is still dominated by traditional, analogue methods to influence elections. The most recent elections, which led the country into a deep political crisis, have been characterized by the excessive use of administrative resources to mobilize voters, as well as controversial manipulations at the stage of ballots counting. One opposition leader, Elene Khoshtaria, identified 13 methods which, according to her claims, have been employed by the ruling party to influence the elections and guarantee the victory. She listed these methods in a

¹³ Personal Data: Political Persuasion: Inside the Influence Industry. How it works. Tactical Tech, 2019

¹⁴ CEC, 2020, accessible at:

<https://cesko.ge/eng/list/show/119970-saqartvelos-parlamentis-2020-tslis-archevnebisatvis-amomrchevelt-a-saerto-raodenoba-saqartveloshi-da-saqartvelos-kovel-saarchevno-olqshi-15-ivlisis-mdgomareobit>

video address, including: registration manipulations, carousel voting, misuse of anti-Covid procedures, bribes, intimidation, correction of vote-tabulation protocols, and even the use of an anti-fungal agent to bypass the voter inking procedure.¹⁵ While the digital and data-driven methods are still accessible and used by political parties – mainly by the ruling party – the need for these more innovative methods is not significant enough for them to overcome the technological challenges that we have described above.

Recommendations

Even though the current situation in Georgia is not alarming in terms of the abuse of personal data in electoral processes (as there are still other resources being abused), this should not allow us to stop monitoring these tools and tactics, as technologies develop quickly and some of the methods described in the global study are increasingly becoming available for Georgian politicians in the next elections. The question is whether the Georgian media and CSO sector will be ready to effectively watchdog and safeguard the democratic processes when new technologies in politics are misused. To ensure that the infrastructure is ready for this kind of protection, the following recommendations have been developed:

1. Watch the use of data by political parties closely

While the NGO sector has been actively monitoring the election processes in the country, including their social media activities, the use of data in political processes has not been a subject for monitoring or study up to this point. As mentioned above, the technologies are emerging and it is crucial to stay on the topic and make sure each development is being reported and analyzed by watchdog institutions. Further and more in-depth study will also benefit the process of learning about the obstacles, the planned activities, or already explored opportunities by the Georgian political parties in the direction of employing data-driven methodologies in political campaigning.

¹⁵ The Dispatch – March 12-13: Of Friends & Haters, Civil.ge, 2021, accessible at: <https://civil.ge/archives/405588>

2. Close the legislative loopholes

Georgian law, like many others worldwide, contains loopholes that enable companies to exploit citizens' personal data. Even though Georgia has adopted the law on General Personal Data Protection¹⁶, we still, according to some experts, “do not fully understand the importance of the issue and underestimate risks derived from improper processing of data. So, consequently, organizations act superficially. The fact is that improper processing of personal data and its consequences are often invisible until it causes significant damage for a person or the whole society.”¹⁷

3. Raise awareness about the emerging issue among CSOs and media

The interviews with the major stakeholders illustrated that the topic still lacks awareness – not only among the general public, but also among CSO activists and media representatives. As the issue is emerging and the importance of it will only increase over time, it is important to keep various professionals educated on the subject, as well as elaborating a separate list of actions targeted to the general public for them to acknowledge the problem and to act accordingly: be aware of the data they share in the digital space and how that can be used against their free will in political processes, especially during pre-election campaigns.

¹⁶ Law of Georgia on Personal Data Protection, Matsne.gov.ge, accessible at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/1561437?publication=9>

¹⁷ Is personal data protected in Georgia? Caucasus Business Week, 2020, accessible at: <https://cbw.ge/georgia/is-personal-data-protected-in-georgia>

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