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LOCAL ELECTIONS DEMONSTRATE CHALLENGES AND PROVIDE OPPORTUNITY TO RENEW COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

TBILISI – The National Democratic Institute (NDI) today released its statement of findings and recommendations from its pre-election assessment mission to Georgia’s October 2017 local elections.

Georgia approaches the October 2017 local elections with many achievements to its credit, including a vibrant political landscape and overwhelming public support for a democratic future. However, the NDI delegation encountered two divergent, parallel Georgias, a dichotomy that could undermine confidence in the political process. One, seen through the lens of the ruling Georgian Dream party, is characterized by very few democratic challenges: a free media and political environment; swift and unbiased justice; and reforms reflecting broad input. The other, held by nearly all the other interlocutors with whom the delegation met, represents a stark contrast: it is characterized by a calculated consolidation of power; uneven and political application of the law; an uneven and unfair electoral playing field; reforms designed to benefit the ruling party; shrinking media space for alternative viewpoints; informal governance; and abuse of state resources, particularly the use of state security services. This stark disparity of viewpoints could confuse and alienate citizens and contribute to instability over time.

Despite this, Georgia’s citizens have high standards for their leaders and institutions and expect a continuation of the country’s successful track record of credible elections. In support of their ambitions, NDI’s delegation noted several key challenges and opportunities in the upcoming electoral process. The election administration mostly enjoys confidence among interlocutors, although important areas for improvement remain. Three controversial reform processes are being conducted very close to Election Day and lack sufficient transparency and inclusiveness. Abuse of state resources, an entrenched and longstanding problem in Georgia, remains a widespread concern. Media faces the challenge of providing the public with reliable, unbiased information about their electoral choices, while the space for pluralistic political discussion appears to be shrinking. Hate speech and disinformation have begun to stoke hostility in the electoral environment.

“The local elections are a critical opportunity for candidates and political parties to prioritize local issues of importance to many voters, who are frustrated with unmet expectations,” said NDI. “The country has the skills, time, support, experience, and resources to address remaining, entrenched electoral challenges. What is still needed is sufficient political will.”

The delegation provided a number of recommendations. These included more inclusive, consensus-based constitutional and legal reform processes; a political party code of conduct emphasizing a commitment to

nonviolence; changes in parties' internal behaviors and practices to attract and prioritize women candidates, as well as ensuring a minimum of 30 percent women candidates on *sakrebulo* party lists; improved training for poll workers on counting and reconciliation procedures; concrete strategies to mitigate against disinformation; impartial and timely application of justice; and increased support for local media outlets and citizen election observer groups.

The mission, which visited Georgia from July 17 to July 21, consisted of Catherine Noone, Deputy Leader of the Irish Senate and Spokesperson on children and youth affairs; David Kramer, former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor at the U.S. Department of State; Janusz Onyszkiewicz, former Minister of Defense and Member of Parliament in the Polish Sejm; Laura Thornton, NDI Senior Resident Country Director in Georgia; Marija Babic, independent electoral expert; Melissa Muscio, NDI Program Director for Georgia, Turkey, and Central Asia; and Michael McNulty, NDI Senior Program Manager for Elections.

The delegation met with prospective candidates and political parties participating in the elections from across the political spectrum; members of the Central Election Commission, the State Audit Office, and the Inter-Agency Commission on Free and Fair Elections; the president; the prime minister; the National Association of Local Authorities; representatives of the Regional Policy and Self-Government Committee; representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs; civil society organizations, including citizen election observer groups; members of parliament; media representatives; and representatives of the international and diplomatic communities.

This mission is the first activity in NDI's international election observation of the local elections. In August, NDI will deploy a team of long-term observers. This will be supplemented by an international Election Day observation delegation. The NDI mission is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy.

NDI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. The Institute has been working in the country since 1994 to support the development of the parliament, political parties and civil society. For more information about NDI and its programs, please visit www.ndi.org.

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