

# The Roots of Georgia's Political Crisis

Georgia's current political crisis can be analyzed through many lenses, as this journal has done on many occasions. However, to fully grasp the root causes of the crisis, one must examine Georgia's journey toward state-building. This journey is also a story of an interplay of historical legacies, external influences, and internal challenges.

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Georgia's political crisis, caused by the [rigged](#) parliamentary elections, [detour](#) from the Western path, and subsequent protests, has made it evident that no single institution, actor, or authority in the country can take the lead and restore the processes to the constitutional and political framework. The absence of independent and authoritative

bodies capable of addressing a crisis of this magnitude clearly indicates the fundamental shortcomings of Georgia's socio-political fabric.

In contrast to Georgia's case, presidential elections in Romania also sparked turmoil but marked a remarkable [example](#) of an effective outcome after the intervention from the Constitutional Court. The first round, held on 24 November 2024, saw independent nationalist candidate Călin Georgescu and center-right politician Elena Lasconi as the leading contenders. However, Georgescu's unexpected announcement led to the Constitutional Court annulling the election due to substantial interference by a Russian influence operation in social media, confirmed by declassified intelligence. In contrast to the case of Georgia, the turmoil was effectively addressed, avoiding the national security crisis with new elections being ordered, highlighting the importance of an independent court and state institutions in maintaining stability and the integrity of constitutional political processes.



**SHOTA GVINERIA**  
Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010-14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.



In Serbia, the discontent with the increasingly authoritarian rule of Vučić has culminated in hundreds of thousand-strong rallies in Belgrade and elsewhere after the collapse of the train station's concrete roof in Novi Sad – a likely outcome of corruption and misspending. The Prime Minister's [resignation](#) in response to the public outcry and a declaration by Vučić that holding new elections is seriously considered also showcase that a sense of public accountability in Serbia, despite the authoritarian trend, is a lot more developed than in Georgia – once again a result of a different social fabric and state-building trajectory.

## Foundational Problems of State-Building

The lingering effects of 70 years of Soviet totalitarian rule have left a profound impact on Georgia's institutions and mindsets. Centralized control and suppression of dissent during the Soviet era discouraged civic engagement and fueled distrust in political behavior and activities. This legacy continues to influence the political landscape, where centralized decision-making and a lack of independent institutions remain prevalent. The Soviet past has created a political culture where power is concentrated, and dissent is rarely accepted, making it difficult to foster a truly democratic environment. Power-sharing in such a system is taboo and shows weakness – what politicians should avoid at all costs.

Building governance structures and democratic norms from scratch was a significant hurdle for Georgia in the early 2000s. The country's lack of historical experience with democratic self-rule has resulted in persistent problems consolidating democracy and strengthening democratic institutions. As a result, the weak independent institutions and bureaucracy have operated as an [extension](#) of the ruling regimes. The inexperience in statecraft has hampered the development of effective governance and democratic practices.

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Russia, meanwhile, has [spared no effort](#) to destabilize Georgia's state-building and democracy for decades. Through hybrid warfare tactics, disinformation campaigns, and territorial threats, Russia has sought to undermine Georgia's sovereignty and democratic progress. These actions created a challenging environment for Georgia's state-building efforts as the country had to navigate external threats while striving to build democratic institutions.

***Three major sociopolitical obstacles—political culture, civic immaturity, and a hyperpolarized communication space—serve as critical barriers to progress.***

Foundational issues in Georgia's state-building lay the groundwork for [understanding](#) the more profound, interconnected challenges that continue to hinder the country's democratic consolidation. Three major sociopolitical obstacles—political culture, civic immaturity, and a hyperpolarized communication space—serve as critical barriers to progress. Together, these challenges perpetuate cycles of distrust, weaken democratic institutions, and impede meaningful societal and political engagement.

## Political Culture

Political culture, or the absence thereof, is one of the most critical factors in Georgia's state-building. The perception of politics in Georgia is often negative, with politics seen as an “ugly” profession reserved for indecent individuals. Political activity

is frequently reduced to part-time participation or debate shows, with limited focus on actionable policy-making. As power-sharing and the division of responsibilities are not happening, the ruling party is perceived as the sole actor responsible for governance. In contrast, opposition parties are seen as critics without specific roles or responsibilities. This dynamic creates a political environment where meaningful engagement and policy development are stifled, and the opposition struggles to present itself as a viable alternative.

Furthermore, the absence of a healthy political process in the country fosters an environment where politics is viewed only as a sustainable career path for the ruling parties. As a result, politics in Georgia becomes a short-term opportunity to exploit power and resources rather than a platform for public service. This dynamic allows the ruling party to [dominate](#) all resources and control most financial means available in politics, further weakening opposition parties and their ability to build strong organizational structures.

Political succession and a peaceful power transfer—essential components of a responsible and accountable political cycle—are rare exceptions. Without a political system that ensures long-term stability or financial viability, individuals rarely see politics as a profession capable of providing for their families. Most of those involved in politics have their day jobs or businesses as their primary occupation, leaving them limited time and space for political activities. Consequently, the political landscape is characterized by stagnation, opportunism, and a lack of genuine democratic competition.

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functional political culture is the emergence of one-party politics and the “winner takes it all” political mindset. The ruling party effectively controls all branches of power and strategic resources in the country. This creates a feedback loop in which opposition parties cannot significantly challenge the ruling regime. Over time, unchallenged regimes become spoiled by their dominance, unwilling to share power. This, in turn, creates a situation where these regimes have no experience or chance to influence politics from the opposition, further perpetuating a cycle of power hoarding and democratic stagnation. The lack of political competition and accountability erodes the democratic foundation of the country, leaving Georgia’s state-building efforts perpetually stalled.

## Civic Immaturity

***The psychological impact of Soviet totalitarian rule has fostered distrust and clan-like thinking among generations of Georgians.***

Civic immaturity further complicates the political landscape. The psychological impact of Soviet totalitarian rule has fostered distrust and clan-like thinking among generations of Georgians. There is no collaboration tradition without kinship or personal relationships driving the agenda. This civic immaturity hinders the development of a cohesive and engaged civil society which is so crucial for democratic state-building. The legacy of distrust and individualism makes it difficult for citizens to unite around common goals and work together for the greater good.

Generations of Georgians lived under a Soviet system designed to cultivate distrust among people, pitting them against each other by forcing individuals to spy and report to the special services. Refusing to collaborate was punished brutally, often leading to imprisonment, forced displacement,

or even a death sentence. The lingering collective PTSD from this experience continues to stand in the way of building mutual trust and collective activism, even among those who share common values or interests. This severely undermines society's ability to mobilize and drive change through organized, grassroots-driven demands. For example, Georgia has no established culture of professional groupings, such as trade unions advocating for improvements in their respective fields. The lack of trust and collective action leaves the public largely fragmented and disengaged, further weakening the foundations of democratic development.

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Georgia's lack of decentralized political activity is a striking example of how socio-political challenges intertwine. The combination of shortcomings in political culture and civic immaturity has resulted in a political landscape where policymaking at the regional and local levels is almost non-existent. Politicians in the regions are rarely perceived as genuine advocates for their communities' interests. Instead, they are often viewed as enforcers of the ruling party's agenda, facilitators of electoral victories, and controllers of local resources. This stifles content-based politics and prevents a bottom-up approach that could foster meaningful political engagement in the regions. The relationship between the central ruling elite and local politicians often mirrors a mutually reinforcing mafia structure where central figures appoint "captains" to manage the peripheries, ensuring loyalty and extracting "revenue shares" in return for their empowerment. This top-down, patron-client dynamic leaves little room for genuine grassroots political activity or the development of independent local leadership, further entrenching Georgia's challenges in consolidating democracy.

## Hyperpolarized Communication Space

Adding to these challenges is the hyperpolarized communication space. Media polarization in Georgia is stark, with outlets divided into clear pro-government and opposition factions. This [creates](#) "echo chambers" where political sides can comfortably propagate unchallenged narratives. Georgia exemplifies the phenomenon of post-fact politics, where facts hold little weight, and public dialogue is reduced to entrenched narratives. In this context, political actors speak only to their constituents, creating a reality where plausible deniability is unlimited. Politicians and media outlets can deny even verifiable facts and convince their audiences of alternative truths with little to no opportunity to reach or influence those in other echo chambers.

The Georgian Dream (GD) fosters this hyperpolarization by refusing to participate in debates or appear on opposition channels while simultaneously banning opposition voices from government-controlled media. Government-backed channels are better resourced and have a wider national reach, amplifying this imbalance. The ruling party leverages this advantage to promote strong party propaganda, further [consolidating](#) its political power.

This dynamic creates an uneven playing field in Georgia's media landscape, where opposition voices struggle to gain traction, and balanced debate is virtually non-existent. The lack of equitable access to media platforms stifles meaningful dialogue and deepens the divide between political factions, eroding democratic norms. The absence of cross-communication between factions further entrenches polarization and hampers efforts to build a unified national narrative. Opposition media often fails to hold opposition parties accountable for specific actions or inaction, fostering

complacency and impacting public discourse and democratic accountability. Meanwhile, government-controlled channels are strictly aligned in a coordinated propaganda effort, reinforcing the ruling party's narrative and amplifying its dominance.

The challenges of political culture, civic immaturity, and media polarization are deeply interconnected. Distrust and polarization create barriers to collective action and governance reforms. For instance, the negative perception of politics discourages civic engagement while media polarization reinforces existing biases and prevents meaningful dialogue. This interconnectedness perpetuates a vicious cycle where each issue exacerbates the others, making democratic progress increasingly difficult. A holistic approach is necessary to address these systemic issues, focusing on rebuilding trust, encouraging balanced media practices, and fostering civic responsibility to support Georgia's state-building and democratic consolidation.

## Light at the End of the Tunnel?

Despite these challenges, there are signs of progress. The parliamentary elections in October 2024 triggered a survival instinct within Georgia's opposition, leading to a reinvigorated and more diverse political landscape. Two months of mass [protests](#) in the streets of Tbilisi showcased an unprecedented level of civic engagement and grassroots-driven activism, signaling steps toward greater political and social maturity.

In the run-up and aftermath of the 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia, there have been encouraging signs of improvement in the country's political culture. One significant development has been the genuine diversification of the opposition. Over the past decade, the Georgian Dream has employed a strategy of demonizing its primary ri-

val, the United National Movement (UNM), and its leaders, including ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili, through arrests, political persecution, and physical assaults. These tactics inevitably led to the fragmentation of the UNM, as various political offshoots sought to distance themselves from the party and appeal to a broader base of voters. Although earlier breakaways, such as *European Georgia* and *Strategy the Builder*, failed to secure substantive support, they began shifting toward a more diverse opposition landscape.

By 2024, this diversification had evolved significantly, offering Georgian voters a range of political choices that transcended the historically binary competition between the Georgian Dream and the UNM. For the first time, voters could choose from four distinct political centers, including the *Coalition for Change*, *Lelo*, and *For Georgia*. Despite the Georgian Dream's efforts to label all opposition as a "collective UNM" and intimidate voters, the opposition managed to take baby steps towards presenting itself as a credible [alternative](#) to one-party rule.

Another sign of progress is the opposition's ability to project readiness to break the devastating practice of one-party rule. For the first time, opposition parties signaled willingness and ability to collaborate and share power in a coalition government, challenging the entrenched winner-takes-all dynamic of Georgian politics. This shift represents a significant step toward fostering a culture of political pluralism, accountability, and shared responsibility. The diversification and maturity displayed by the opposition provide hope that Georgia can move away from its history of centralized power and authoritarian tendencies, laying the groundwork for a more democratic and inclusive political environment.

The maturing of civil society and activism is also observable, contributing to the more optimistic outlook of Georgia's future. Even the modest ad-

vancements in political culture and opposition dynamics have triggered significant changes toward greater civic maturity. Since October 2024, we have witnessed a different and innovative approach to public protests. Departing from the traditional mass rallies in front of the Parliament building—where opposition leaders took turns making political declarations—the new wave of demonstrations is characterized by its decentralized, grassroots-driven nature. These [movements](#) are no longer monolithic or solely orchestrated by political parties; instead, they are driven by the genuine grievances of various segments of Georgian society.

Recent examples of people uniting around shared interests and values beyond personal loyalties offer hope for Georgia's democratic future. Professional groups such as doctors, teachers, IT specialists, business representatives, and even acting and former civil servants have been consistently and vocally demanding free and fair elections, as well as the release of their peers who were arrested during protests. These groups are mobilizing not as extensions of political parties but as independent actors advocating for issues that directly affect the future orientation of society as a whole.

A citizen movement, [Daitove](#), is an example of civic maturity. A grassroots initiative to support citizens traveling to Tbilisi from the regions to participate in anti-Russian protests initially focused on providing accommodation by connecting people willing to open their homes to protesters. The Facebook group quickly evolved into a multifaceted platform for mutual aid. It facilitated first aid, food, transportation, childcare, and the delivery of essential supplies while organizing fundraising efforts to procure and distribute protest materials. Beyond logistical support, *Daitove* fostered solidarity and collaboration among diverse groups, creating a powerful example of civic maturity and grassroots activism.

### **Recent protests have broken free from the constraints of traditional centralized activism.**

Additionally, recent protests have broken free from the constraints of traditional centralized activism. Instead of concentrating in a single location, protests now co-occur across multiple sites in Tbilisi, other cities, and even rural regions. This decentralized nature has made it increasingly difficult for authorities to contain or suppress dissent using the standard authoritarian measures that the Georgian government has honed over the years.

Perhaps the most transformative development is the active involvement of the Gen Z generation in the demonstrations. Georgian youth have started recognizing its pivotal role and responsibility in shaping the country's present and future. Their growing engagement appears to be an antidote to the post-totalitarian traumas of distrust and ambivalence that have long plagued Georgian society. With fresh perspectives and a willingness to challenge entrenched norms, this new generation is driving a cultural shift prioritizing accountability, transparency, and inclusivity. Unlike many similar movements in the West, in Georgia's case, the youth participation is less ideologized, without a clear left-wing or right-wing agenda.

While some encouraging signs of change have been observed in Georgia's political culture and civic maturity, the hyperpolarized communication space remains a significant obstacle to democratic consolidation. Government-controlled channels continue to strictly follow the regime's propaganda, amplifying narratives that support the ruling party while dismissing or discrediting opposing voices. Conversely, opposition media outlets remain focused primarily on critiquing the government, offering extensive coverage of its alleged wrongdoings.

It must be acknowledged that the opposition media's heroic non-stop coverage of the two months of protests has played a crucial role in sustaining public opposition to the regime. Despite facing continuous financial crises, the TV channels Mtvvari, Pirveli, and Formula have consistently provided visibility to the protests, broadcasting the grievances of various societal groups and maintaining public pressure on the government.

A small, albeit short-lived, positive development has been the impact of sustained mass protests and public pressure on one of the key pillars of government propaganda: the public broadcaster. For a short time, the public broadcaster granted protest representatives an hour of daily airtime. However, since January 2025, this access was revoked, a prominent critical TV anchor was dismissed, and the station swiftly reverted to a pro-Georgian Dream editorial stance. This illustrated the urgent need for substantial reform of the GPB; otherwise, any concessions will be nothing more than temporary cosmetic changes.

## Can the Society Cash In?

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Georgia can now either capitalize on its society's strong determination for a democratic and European future or risk plunging into the abyss of authoritarian rule. The joint article in this issue outlines those possible paths in front of the country. Georgia indeed has the potential for transformative change; however, the persistence

of entrenched challenges, such as hyperpolarized communication, political culture deficiencies, and lingering authoritarian practices, makes momentum very fragile and explosive.

At this turning point, it is imperative for Georgia's political opposition, civil society, and strategic international partners to fully recognize their acute roles in ensuring that the nation's democratic aspirations succeed. To prevent regression into autocracy, these stakeholders must consolidate their efforts into an articulated and coordinated strategy to secure free and fair elections and the integrity of future elections. This strategy must prioritize:

- **Unity and Coordination:** Opposition parties, civil society groups, and grassroots leaders need to overcome internal divisions and work collaboratively toward shared democratic objectives. Unity among these actors will amplify their influence and legitimacy.
- **Grassroots Engagement:** Civic actors need to continue fostering decentralized, inclusive movements that empower citizens to demand accountability and participate in shaping their country's future.
- **Media Reforms:** Addressing media polarization is essential to fostering a more informed and engaged public. Promoting unifying national narratives and ensuring fair access to platforms for all voices will be critical to breaking the echo chambers that perpetuate division.
- **International Advocacy and Support:** Strategic partners, including the EU, the UK, the US, and other democratic allies, need to continue pressing the Georgian Dream regime to hold new elections while providing material and moral support to civil society and independent institutions. Recent decisions of the Trump administration to cripple USAID and demonize foreign assistance are not helpful.



The determination of Georgian society, evidenced by recent protests and the growing involvement of younger generations, is a powerful force for change. However, it must be channeled effectively to ensure lasting reforms. At this breaking point,

Georgia has a unique opportunity to overcome its systemic challenges and achieve a democratic breakthrough. The stakes are monumental—not just for Georgia but as a test case for the endurance of democracy in the region ■