

Has Georgia Become a Eurasian Country?

Official results of the 26 October 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia signify the end of a particular stage of its development. The substance of this stage was a widely shared commitment to turn Georgia into a European country recognized as such by the West; its beginning could be dated to the end of the 1990s or with the 2003 Rose Revolution. Admittedly, Georgia had not been entirely European in its social and political practices. Still, it recognized European ideas and norms as its own and, bit by bit, approximated them or, at least, genuinely tried to. Conversely, Europe gradually came to acknowledge Georgia as a part of itself.

With this election, Georgia is moving to a qualitatively different condition, which can be called a Eurasian Georgia.

There is a caveat, however. Considerable evidence

shows that the election result did not reflect the will of the Georgian people. Western assessments of the elections have also been the most critical since 2003, when the popular protest against the rigged elections led to the change of government. However, while it is impossible to predict the future, let us assume that the Georgian Dream (GD) will be less likely to give in, unlike the Shevardnadze government in 2003. Therefore, this piece supposes that the official election results will stand, however unfair.

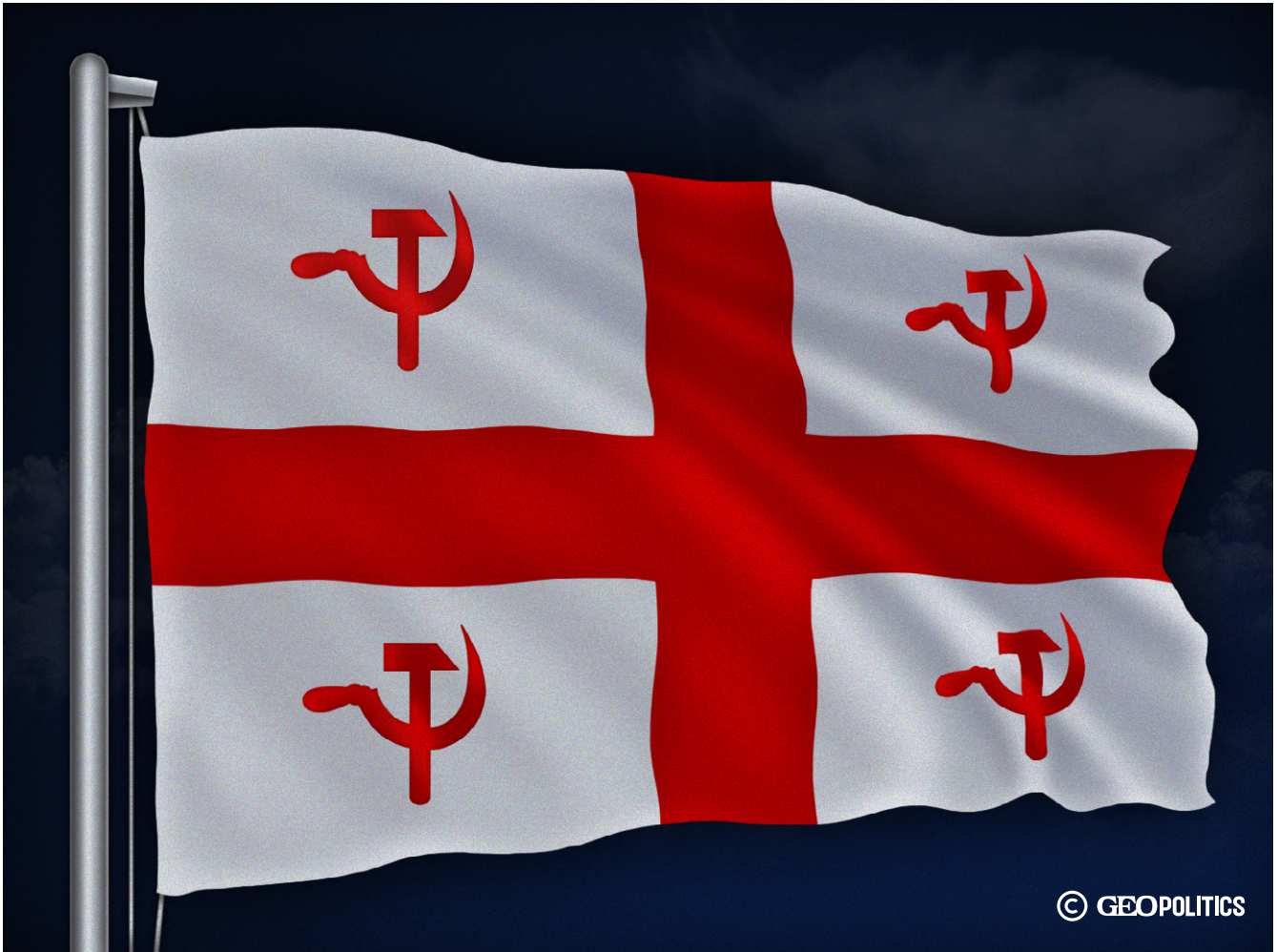
Considerable evidence shows that the election result did not reflect the will of the Georgian people.

If this is so, there is a need for an analysis of how Georgia has come to this point and what should be expected now.



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Why Did the European Georgia Lose? A Geopolitical Aspect

The massive electoral violations do not explain everything. Even according to exit polls commissioned by independent TV companies, the GD got at least 40 percent of the vote—quite a lot. Why was this the case?

Most importantly, the GD's central message, “We Choose Peace,” proved quite effective. Yes, all the talk of the “Global War Party” that conspired to drag Georgia into a war with Russia constituted a paranoid delusion, while banners depicting a contrast between a war-ravaged Ukraine and a flourishing Georgia were utterly immoral. However, this activated the most basic human instinct – the fear of war and destruction it brings about.

How could the opposition confront this? It decid-

ed not to be drawn into the “war vs. peace” debate and changed the subject instead. The elections were portrayed as a choice between Europe and Russia. This rightly depicted what was at stake. But how successful this was as a pre-election strategy is an utterly different question.

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On the face of it, it had to be: we know that a substantial majority of Georgians prefer Europe to Russia. But the GD succeeded in planting an assumption in the minds of many (without actually spelling it out) that, at the moment, the move to Europe implied a war with Russia or at least a sig-

nificant risk of it. One should not be surprised if the fear of war successfully beat the attraction of Europe.

In the aftermath of the elections, some reproached the opposition for not effectively confronting the GD on the war vs. peace issue. This may be a fair critique. But the opposition made this choice because it did not have a simple answer to the government's rhetorical question: "Do you want a war, then?" Such an answer had to account for the reality that Russia was truly punishing Ukraine for its pro-Western policies, and it attacked Georgia for the same reason in 2008. The best the opposition came up with was saying that "isolation is bad." Fair enough, but this proved not sufficiently strong for many.

In a pre-election campaign, clear, simple, and straightforward messages beat the complex geopolitical analysis. Neither the opposition nor civil society has developed a sufficiently clear and powerful response to overcome the GD's fearmongering.

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Civil Society vs. Administrative Resources

Almost all elections in Georgia have been fought between the government's so-called administrative resources and civil society (understood broadly as public-minded people capable of self-organization). The playing field is highly uneven as civil society's resources are meager compared to the state's.

People in Georgia often criticize the opposition, and some of this criticism is fair. However, it is doubtful that the collective opposition could have been much stronger at this point. A powerful opposition is based on a robust civil society with a relatively broad societal appeal, ultimately from a solid middle class. Georgia does not yet have this.

On the other hand, the government has a well-oiled state machinery inherited from the United National Movement government. The GD further increased its capacity to control and repress society. In 2003, Eduard Shevardnadze's lacked that kind of resource. Hence the loss of power.

From Georgia's recent history, we know that the opposition can still win elections if societal discontent reaches a critical point and if there are discords within the ruling elite. This was not the case this time.

The state of the economy was conducive to this. While Georgians deem the level of their welfare unsatisfactory, the economic dynamics of the last years were reasonably positive, also because, in the short term, Georgia had benefitted from its stand towards the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The high inflation of 2022 was largely forgotten. Bread and butter issues that most people are concerned with did not play a significant role in these elections. It is hard to win without appealing to them.

The Future of pro-European Society in Eurasian Georgia?

So, why do the official election results turn Georgia into a Eurasian country instead of a European one?

Some Georgians assert that the GD government is steering the country towards a “Russian” identity. Indeed, the recent election results have essentially cemented Georgia’s position on the Russian side in the broader Russia-West conflict, even if this alignment is not explicitly declared. However, many other non-Western countries share this stance. It remains unlikely that the GD will openly align Georgia with Russia, for instance, by joining the Russia-led Eurasian Union, mainly due to the strong anti-Russian sentiment within Georgian society. Publicly provoking this sentiment could be unwise. Nonetheless, Russia has already secured a significant victory in Georgia by effectively sidelining its European aspirations. The rest is a matter of detail.

I am trying to make the point that Georgia is evolving into a typologically Eurasian country. I first wrote about this in an [opinion](#) for JAMnews (this is a revised piece for GEOPolitics) next day after the elections. This designation suggests an ambiguous foreign policy where anti-Western rhetoric and actions coexist with selective, transactional engagements with the West. This approach aligns with GD leader Bidzina Ivanishvili’s notion of “regulating relations” with the West. Domestically, such Eurasian countries tend to have autocratic power structures, even though significant segments of their populations may aspire to European-style liberal democracies.

One of Ivanishvili’s significant gains from this shift towards the Eurasian camp is his ability to disregard Western opinions, a stance he has

maintained for the last few years. Following these elections, a systematic offensive against civil society institutions—opposition parties, NGOs, independent media, and universities—is anticipated. This crackdown is already announced and will likely dominate the political landscape in the coming years.

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The potential outcome of this offensive could range from Georgia becoming akin to Belarus or Azerbaijan to a less extreme scenario, like Erdogan’s Türkiye. Over the past decades, Georgia’s most notable achievement has been a vibrant civil society rather than its EU membership candidate status, which currently holds little significance. The entrenched culture of free speech and activism among Georgians challenges efforts to reverse these gains, a challenge Ivanishvili appears determined to confront.

This shift marks a transition for Georgian civil society from an offensive to a defensive posture. The situation can be likened to Ukrainian fighters in Donbas—fighting to preserve what can be saved while making tactical retreats. Unlike military conflicts, the tools of resistance here must remain non-violent, as any turn toward violence would favor the regime.

In the wake of the official election results, Georgian society has reacted with confusion, despair, and a denial of reality. Emigration is a path many are considering, and some will likely pursue it. This response is understandable but cannot persist indefinitely. While this particular battle may be lost, the situation is not beyond repair. Georgia’s turn towards Eurasia is part of a broader in-

ternational trend and the future hinges on both the resilience of its society and the trajectory of regional and global politics.

The Role of the West Under the New Circumstances

Historically, Georgian civil society has viewed the West as its primary ally, a relationship that will persist in this new phase. However, in Georgia and likely in the West, there has been a tendency to overestimate the extent of the West's influence and capabilities concerning Georgia.

Until recently, the West, including the US and the EU, had significantly influenced Georgia. Its primary role extended beyond assisting the government with specific reforms or funding civil society organizations. Crucially, it acted as a guiding reference for the country's overall direction, effectively curbing the autocratic tendencies of various governments by demonstrating that certain actions were incompatible with Georgia's chosen path. As a result, collaboration between Georgian civil society and Western actors was vital in sustaining a relatively high level of democratic freedoms.

This influence, however, largely relied on Georgia's firm commitment to European and Euro-Atlantic integration—a commitment both Georgians and their Western partners considered a given. This baseline ensured that no government could entirely disregard Western advice, even if it did not always fully implement it. Now that Georgia has effectively abandoned the prospect of Western integration, despite making hollow declarations to the contrary, this leverage has diminished significantly.

This does not mean the West has no influence left. Measures such as canceling visa-free travel would be particularly impactful. Sanctions could be imposed on regime leaders, particularly Bidzina

Ivanishvili and specific economic benefits could be withdrawn. However, with the GD securing at least another four years in power, these actions may not be enough to compel a change in the government's overall policies, let alone force it to relinquish power.

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Given the outcome of the elections, the Western political class may find itself as uncertain as the Georgian public about the next steps. Before the elections, the West followed the longstanding appeals of Georgian civil society by clearly articulating the stakes involved. The messages were unequivocal: with the GD in power, Georgia's EU integration would be indefinitely stalled. Despite this, the approach proved inadequate. The question now is whether the West has more effective tools to influence Georgia.

From Ivanishvili's perspective, he has shown a readiness to engage in transactional negotiations with Western actors, albeit from a stronger position. How the West will respond remains uncertain as there is likely little appetite for dealing with GD leaders who have significantly damaged their credibility. Nonetheless, given the current deadlock in Georgia's European integration, a transactional relationship with the regime might still develop, focusing on specific projects like infrastructure. However, even in such a scenario, the West is likely to view and treat Georgia as just another Eurasian state rather than a strategic partner.

In any case, Georgian civil society will likely have to adjust to relying less on Western support than it has in the past. The most meaningful way the West

can now support Georgia is by bolstering its global position and offering stronger, more effective assistance to Ukraine in its conflict with Russia ■