

Special OP Elections: How, Why, and What Next?

On October 26, Georgia held its parliamentary elections, which were marred by significant irregularities, rendering the process neither free nor fair. The elections resembled a meticulously executed covert operation, featuring all the special-op hallmarks: extensive pre-planning, psychological manipulation, strict central command, strategic deception, targeted influence, decoys, and effective neutralization of opposition efforts.

Georgian Dream (GD) secured an unexpected boost of 192,000 votes compared to the 2020 elections and 288,000 more than the 2021 local elections, tallying 1,120,016 votes, or 53.92% of the total. In contrast, the combined opposition managed only 784,803 votes or 37.78%. The surprising results immediately raised suspicions of widespread electoral fraud. Discrepancies between exit polls conducted by Edison Research and HarrisX and the official count intensified these concerns. The specific methods of manipulation are dissected in detail in the opening article of this volume by Hans

Gutbrod. We will attempt to give a broader picture of what transpired before and on election day and how these results came about.

The Scene-Setter

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In the months leading up to the election, Georgian Dream set the stage with a carefully orchestrated campaign designed to cast the pro-European opposition as foreign agents and “warmongers.” By pushing the idea that a win for the opposition would drag Georgia into war with Russia, GD leaned into fears already embedded in the Georgian psyche. The ruling party painted itself as the only force capable of maintaining “peace” and preserving “traditional Georgian values.” Russian offi-



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cially eagerly supported these narratives, positioning GD as a “defender” of sovereignty and stability, protecting Georgians from the malign influence of the Western powers. This strategic alignment effectively framed the election as a life-or-death choice between war and peace, allowing GD to sway public opinion before votes were even cast.

However, it would be a mistake to attribute the electoral win (if one may call it a win) only to a successful GD campaign. This was only a part of the picture. Many wondered why the GD chose such an anti-European and pro-Russian stance. The reason might have been simple – to remove the main ammo from the opposition and civil society – the allegation of being pro-Russian and anti-European. GD gladly embraced the label of anti-European but redefined the narrative into not anti-EU, but anti-war, not pro-Russian, but pro-Peace, not anti-reform, but anti-liberal, not protecting the civil society and pluralism, but protecting Georgian traditional values and orthodoxy.

Most importantly, this positioning made the GD immune to Western pressure. Preparation for the massive electoral fraud was expected to increase EU and American pressure at every step, especially with the vocal opposition and civil society. With a proactive anti-interference shield, preparing and implementing special-op elections was much easier.

Russian Support for the GD Message Box

In the lead-up to the October 2024 elections, Russian officials actively reinforced Georgian Dream’s anti-Western and pro-“sovereignty” stance, presenting themselves as allies against supposed Western interference. Statements from top Russian figures, including Sergey Lavrov, Maria Zakharova, and Dmitry Peskov, echoed GD’s messaging on issues like the 2008 war, the foreign agents law, and cultural sovereignty. This align-

ment underscored GD’s image as the defender of Georgian stability and independence, with Russia positioned as a supportive partner against Western influence.

Russian leaders openly backed Georgia’s foreign agents law, which mandates NGOs receiving foreign funding to register as “foreign interest” entities, supposedly in the name of transparency. Lavrov argued that similar laws exist in the U.S. and Europe, casting Georgia’s version as lenient and framing Western criticism as hypocritical. Peskov supported this stance, saying foreign agent laws are standard for states protecting their sovereignty. This rhetoric reinforced Georgia’s claim that such laws safeguard Georgian autonomy.

Another recurring theme in Russian support for GD has been the reframing of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war as a conflict instigated by the West. Zakharova asserted that Saakashvili’s government, influenced by the West, initiated the conflict, forcing Russia to intervene. Russian officials used GD’s statements to legitimize this narrative, shifting blame onto the West and positioning Russia as a stabilizing force.

Russian officials also bolstered Georgia’s cultural sovereignty stance, portraying it as the protector of Georgian identity against Western liberalism. Lavrov praised Georgia’s resistance to “Western norms” like the LGBT agenda, painting it as a bulwark against foreign cultural intrusion. Zakharova emphasized Georgia’s role in shielding it from becoming a “second front” in Western geopolitics, reinforcing the idea that Georgia protects it from Western influence.

Russian leaders criticized EU diplomats for supporting Georgian protests against the foreign agents’ law. Grigory Karasin, chair of Russia’s International Affairs Committee, condemned EU Ambassador Pawel Herczyński for allegedly interfering in Georgian affairs, reinforcing GD’s narrative of foreign meddling. Prominent Russian

figures like Alexander Dugin labeled the presence of Baltic and Icelandic diplomats at protests as “neo-colonial,” framing EU support for protests as an affront to Georgian sovereignty.

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Lastly, Russian officials portrayed themselves as peacemakers willing to “assist” in normalizing relations between Georgia and the occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Lavrov stated that Moscow was open to brokering non-aggression agreements, casting Russia as a stabilizing force in contrast to Western powers. By framing Russia as a mediator, these statements supported GD’s claim to be a stabilizing power in the region while attributing past tensions to the actions of Georgia’s former leadership under Saakashvili.

While these statements were never publicly endorsed by the GD, they left a clear logical aftertaste – Moscow favored Ivanishvili. Since the main threat to peace is Moscow, and Ivanishvili is his favorite – there will be no war similar to Ukraine. Hence, choosing the Georgian Dream is a guarantee of peace. One should not underestimate the importance of this logical chain. As Ghia Nodia explains elsewhere in this volume, such a strong message was not countered effectively either by the opposition groups, the civil society, or Georgia’s Western partners.

Setting the Stage

Preparation for the fraudulent elections started as early as 2023 and involved a number of changes to

the laws, which proved essential in delivering the needed results in the October elections. First, the GD [introduced](#) the electronic counting of the cast ballots in about 90% of the electorate and 70% of the electoral precincts. This was done to remove the election night pressure from the Central Election Commission (CEC) and GD. Previous elections in [2020](#) and [2016](#) saw protests in the streets and around the CEC building because of the delayed vote count and apparent attempts from the CEC to first publish the results from the precincts favoring the Government and accustoming the public to an imminent loss. The opposition and civil society supported the electronic counting system since it also removed the chances of chain voting, the biggest problem in the 2020 elections.

The Central Election Commission was made immune to external pressure and internal revolt. First, the appointment rule of the CEC Chair was [changed](#). The opposition’s privilege to nominate the deputy CEC Chair was removed. Lastly, the ability to stifle CEC decision-making by eliminating the necessity to vote with a qualified majority was changed. All of these changes were dragged in time, and the criticism coming from the opposition and civil society, as well as the Venice Commission and the EU, was totally ignored. Furthermore, in May 2024, the Parliament [allowed](#) political parties to designate specific individuals on their party list as “delegates” for registered voters in specific districts. This change replaced the previous majoritarian MP system with these new delegates, enabling the ruling party to align itself with locally influential figures. These individuals, often called “local lords,” wielded considerable financial and other resources, giving them a certain level of support within their communities.

The largest and most significant change [came](#) in August 2024, when the CEC adopted a resolution stating that the distribution of functions among precinct commission members would occur seven days before the election rather than on elec-

tion day. This change allowed the GD to use the precinct commissions' loyal members' services on election day.

The Money

During the pre-election period, the eight main political entities [reported](#) revenues of 18.8 million GEL and expenditures of 25.3 million GEL. Georgian Dream accounted for 53% of total party spending. 94% (17.7 million GEL) of party income came from donations, while only 6% (1 million GEL) was state funding. The Georgian Dream received 34% (6 million GEL) of pre-election donations and 52% (13.4 million GEL) of yearly donations. 40% of donors gave more than a year's average salary in Georgia, contributing 84% of total donations, highlighting reliance on large donors. Parties spent 17.7 million GEL on advertising, with Georgian Dream spending more than 50% of this sum.

More importantly, from January 2023 to October 2024, companies linked to Georgian Dream donors [received](#) 684 million GEL in state contracts while donating 3.1 million GEL back to the party through legal means. Reportedly, much more money was donated back to the Georgian Dream illegally without reporting the sums. The donors from the state programs, like Enterprise Georgia or state agriculture subsidies, gave at least 9 million GEL to the donors of the Georgian Dream.

The superficial analysis of the command and control [system](#) by the Georgian Dream aimed at mobilizing voters involved at least 30 persons per electoral precinct (on 3111 precincts), including coordinators, "captains" (a new term in Georgian politics, denoting a person in charge of mobilizing voters before and on election day), two call center operators and 2-3 fake observers from the party affiliated NGOs. This amounts to almost 100.000 party-affiliated persons in charge of mobilizing voters. With an average salary of 150 GEL (to say the least) per month for three months, the un-

reported money necessary only for this endeavor exceeds 40 million GEL (approximately 15 mln USD) of "black money." The running of undeclared offices, where election day call centers were located, increases this sum even further. Bribery and vote-buying boost the numbers to a scale unfathomable by Georgian standards.

However, the money spent for electoral purposes did not come only from the party. In fact, most of the systemic vote-buying went from the state budget. As described by Hans Gutbrod elsewhere in this issue, the Georgian Dream used the data available to the state to target various groups for vote mobilization. Pensioners, recipients of social assistance, public servants, employees of non-commercial entities of public law, teachers, and students were targeted as the groups easily susceptible to party pressure. Since their incomes depend on the state budget, the volatility of these groups was understandable. The increase of state pensions, [spiking](#) of the recipients of social assistance, forgiveness for tax liabilities, and [amnesty](#) on non-premeditated crimes made thousands of families indebted to the Georgian Dream. Will Neal even [reported](#) on a bizarre support program for the 10,000-strong beekeeping sector. Through these budgetary programs, well-organized institutionalized vote-buying took place, costing the state budget several billion GEL

Neutralization of Migrant Vote

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active phase. For the Georgian Dream, major population group to be neutralized were Georgian migrants, who could not be subjected to pre-election pressure. The operation of suppressing migrant votes, relied on two key components. Firstly, the number of Georgian migrants who could vote was minimized by opening a limited number of electoral precincts only in cities where Georgia has official representations. For instance, the several hundred thousand strong Georgian diaspora in the US had to travel to either Washington DC, New York, or San Francisco. Additionally, the Georgian diaspora in France had to travel thousands of miles to reach Paris. The result was that only 34,575 Georgians voted abroad. Georgian Dream only received 13.4% of this vote, contrasted to 53.9% of those Georgians who voted in electronic precincts in Georgia and 66.7% of those who voted in non-electronic (traditional) precincts.

But this was not enough. The active phase of the elections special operation involved identifying and using the ID numbers of those Georgians who lived abroad and were not on the consular registry, thus boosting the number of Georgian Dream supporters at the expense of non-present Georgian voters.

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The ballot itself was part of the “theater.” Although supposed to protect voter anonymity, the ballot design left marks on the reverse side, partially revealing the voter’s choice. Our reader can see the simulation of such a “leaked” ballot on the back side of the cover of this issue. GD capitalized on this to enforce “voting discipline,” the Central Election Commission did little to address concerns the opposition and independent groups raised. With the

visual cues set, GD moved into the next phase of its operation – warning the residents of the rural areas massively that they would be able to identify if someone did not vote for the GD or voted for the opposition. In fact, it was easy to identify who voted for whom since major opposition parties were in the upper half of the ballot, while GD was at the bottom.

Furthermore, the GD allegedly paid the opposition supporters in the regions, who were already intimidated and indebted, to give up their ID cards. This scheme was reported [regularly](#) before election day. This scheme mainly targeted the opposition supporters, who were easily identifiable in the small municipalities and rural areas.

GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations) also [played](#) a pivotal role in Georgian Dream’s election rigging strategy, acting as a façade for legitimate monitoring while actively contributing to voter intimidation and manipulation. Two major GONGOs, the Observer of Politics and Law and the International Observatory for Barristers and Lawyers, headed by Grigol Gagnidze (GD activist and a former [candidate](#) for the Prosecutor general), deployed over 5,000 observers combined. By comparison, independent groups like My Vote and ISFED mobilized far fewer observers (2,000 and 1,500, respectively). Smaller, dubious organizations such as the Khashuri Women Entrepreneur Union and the Khoni IDP Initiative Group, to name just a few, added several thousand more GD-affiliated monitors, further stacking the deck in favor of the ruling party.

Georgian Migrants – a Voters Pool to Draw From

The voter list of Georgian citizens includes 3,504,968 voters. According to the Central Election Commission data, 276,000 were not in Georgia on the election day. The analysis of the open

District	Precinct	# of voters in the Registry	# of voters in the Special List	# of actual voters	# of voters abroad on election day	% of voters, with the exclusion of the voters abroad	Unexplained difference	% of vote received by the GD
Akhalkalaki	40.48	149	0	135	262	109.8%	-12	91%
Akhalkalaki	40.27	383	5	271	129	104.6%	-12	97%
Marneuli	22.68	189	14	180	34	106.5%	-11	94 %
Akhalkalaki	40.35	125	3	98	31	101 %	-1	96%
Akhalkalaki	40.18	248	5	191	63	100.5 %	-1	94%
Kvareli	16.12	270	4	249	26	100.4%	-1	82%

data from the Georgian Statistics Office provides that the total number of Georgian citizens present in Georgia in 2024 is almost 500-600.000 persons less than the number of people in the unified electoral register. These half a million voters are largely unaccounted for, a theory being that they hold Georgian citizenship and ID cards, however, they left Georgia before 2010 and have not reentered the country, thus maintaining citizenship but not being registered by the border police.

The easiest way to determine that the Georgian Dream indeed used the foreign-based Georgians' IDs is to look at those precincts where the total number of the persons eligible to vote in a precinct was less than the combined sum of the number of persons who voted (official statistics of the CEC) and the number of persons in those precincts, who were abroad (official statistics of the MIA, provided

to the CEC and the opposition parties, who made the data available to the author of this piece). In at least six precincts, the results were striking and illogical and could only be extended by stacking the ballot box with the votes from those citizens who were not in Georgia on election day (see the table above).

International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) [reported](#) on November 7, that the difference between turnout rates of male voters in a number of precincts deviated from the normal distribution. 6 Polling stations were reported where a male turnout was higher than 100%, even under the theoretical assumption that all voters registered in the special list at these stations were men. The Central Election Commission has avoided an answer to these questions in its press briefings (see the table below).

District	Precinct	Number of registered makes in the voter registry	Number of registered males who participated in the elections	Number of voters in the special list
Borjomi	36.11	514	599	8
Kvareli	16.12	123	140	4
Tskaltubo	58.21	95	105	3
Adigeni	38.11	122	127	1
Samtredia	54.18	660	673	10
Ninotsminda	41.15	26	65	38

The [investigation](#) of the TV Pirveli also concluded that the ID cards of persons not in Georgia on election day were used massively. In the ethnic minority populated regions, where the villages are almost empty, almost 100% of the registered voters “showed up” on election day. In reality, several GD coordinators collected the ID numbers of the non-present voters in exchange for a few dozen dollars. Then, they used the personal information to cast votes in favor of the ruling party. The investigative journalists’ story confirmed this from the local residents of the visited villages.

Analysis of the election outcomes of several districts also makes it quite clear how the illegal usage (either by confiscating, or by using a non-present citizens’ ID cards) of ID cards transpired. For instance, in the Marneuli district, voter turnout, compared to the 2020 and 2024 elections, did not increase. In 2020, 45,013 persons voted (whose votes were considered valid) in the Marneuli district. In 2024, this number decreased to 43,198. However, the support for the Georgian Dream spiked from 47.69% in 2020 to 79.62% in 2024, and the total number of voters cast for the Georgian Dream increased by 12,928. Incidentally, the total number of Marneuli residents residing abroad is almost 13,000.

A similar trend can be observed in the Kakheti region, which consists of 8 electoral districts and nearly 300,000 voters. In 2020, the average support for Georgian Dream stood at 49%. In 2024, the support increased to 61%. However, the total number of voters who voted in Kakheti has not changed. In 2020, 174,536 voters cast valid ballots in the Kakheti region; in 2024, this number increased slightly to 174,559. This, however, translated into a net 19,977 voter increase in Georgian Dream’s support. Incidentally, the number of Kakheti voters abroad on election day is about 23,000.

Familiar Post-Election Crisis

Following the official announcement of results, Georgia plunged into a familiar post-election crisis, similar to those seen in 2016 and 2020. In 2016, after the UNM lost to the Georgian Dream, the internal turmoil within the opposition was severe. Two parties that failed to pass the electoral threshold (Free Democrats and State for the People) collapsed, while the UNM experienced a major split. European Georgia, made up of MPs who had entered parliament from the UNM list, broke ranks with Mikheil Saakashvili and chose to participate in the parliament despite his call for a boycott.

The aftermath of the 2020 elections, tainted by allegations of chain voting and fraud, saw most opposition parties boycotting parliament for several months. It took the intervention of EU Council President Charles Michel to broker a deal that ended the boycott, but the damage was done. The abrupt shift from demanding a boycott to accepting parliamentary mandates within five months eroded public confidence in the opposition’s resolve and consistency.

The 2024 elections have once again trapped opposition parties in this cycle. This time, however, the scale of electoral fraud is far greater, prompting the opposition to pledge a full boycott, leaving GD to govern alone in a one-party parliament. Unlike in 2020, there are no smaller splinter parties like Girchi or Citizens ready to break the boycott. This unity increases the likelihood that the boycott will hold firm, and the opposition seems more determined to avoid repeating past mistakes. However, unlike 2020, the room for external mediation is a substantially limited. Thus the crisis will need to be resolved internally, by domestic actors. And since it is a zero-sum game (either the government maintains official results and the opposition loses, or the opposition manages to delegitimize results

and achieves new elections, which amounts to the loss by the Georgian Dream), the crisis may deepen in the nearest weeks.

Boycotting the parliament comes with significant risks. It only makes sense if all opposition parties abstain from taking their seats, leaving the Georgian Dream to govern alone, thus fully exposing its authoritarian nature. The primary goal here would be to delegitimize the ruling party's governance. However, the success of this strategy hinges on two factors: internal and external delegitimization. Internally, a unified boycott might erode public confidence in the legitimacy of the government. Externally, it could pressure the EU and the US to reconsider their stance on the election outcome. But if Western partners, despite the evidence of electoral fraud, continue to engage with the Georgian Dream government as if nothing happened, the boycott could backfire, leaving the opposition politically and financially weakened.

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The financial implications are especially concerning. According to Georgian law, political parties that receive more than 1% of the vote in parliamentary elections are eligible for state funding, but only if their MPs retain their mandates. Based on the current election results, the four main opposition parties stand to lose a combined total of over 21 million GEL (around 8 million USD) annually if they proceed with the boycott. Specifically, Coalition for Change would forfeit 1.5 million GEL per year, the UNM 1.39 million GEL, Strong Georgia 1.31 million GEL, and Gakharia's For Georgia 1.24 million GEL. Abandoning these funds could devastate the parties' operations and long-term

viability, making the cost of the boycott potentially catastrophic without guaranteeing new elections.

A Zero Sum Juncture Point – First Day of the New Parliament Session

Although the immediate future is uncertain, the opposition's strategy is clear: rallies and protests are planned, culminating in a mass demonstration during the new Parliament's first session. The opposition hopes that public discontent over the rigged elections will be strong enough to force the government to call new elections.

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A parallel can be drawn to the events of 2003. Following the fraudulent November 2003 elections, mass protests erupted, with opposition supporters storming the Parliament as Eduard Shevardnadze attempted to convene its first session. The session was abruptly suspended, and Shevardnadze had to flee the building. This led to a political crisis, which was only resolved when the President resigned, paving the way for new elections.

However, while the current situation bears similarities in electoral fraud and public outrage, the dynamics of state power in 2024 are starkly different. Unlike in 2003, where Shevardnadze's orders for police and military intervention went unheeded, the Georgian Dream now commands a well-trained, loyal police force, including a sizable riot unit. The government has not hesitated to use rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons to disperse protests in the past. Today, the law enforcement agencies operate under the strict control of Ivanishvili's loyalists, making a repeat of 2003's defiance by security forces unlikely.

The next political battleground in Georgia is set to play out in the streets—mass protests against an illegitimately elected government. It's like driving in a heavy storm with a windshield flooded by rain, making it hard to see what lies ahead. The balance of local power and the opposition's moral high ground will steer the outcome of this standoff. Yet, the path forward is unclear, and without external

intervention or mediation, the political crisis risks veering into dangerous territory. Support from international actors could help wipe the windshield clear, allowing for a more civilized dialogue and easing the confrontation. However, given the high stakes and the zero-sum nature of the confrontation, the road ahead remains treacherous and uncertain ■