

Editorial

The Power of Presence: Ensuring a Peaceful Transfer in Georgia's 2024 Elections

The upcoming Georgian parliamentary elections are poised to be a turning point for the country's political future. As ballots are cast and results tallied, what happens afterward could be even more critical. If Bidzina Ivanishvili, the de facto leader of Georgian Dream (GD), sees his party losing power, the challenge will not be limited to counting votes—it will be about ensuring a peaceful transfer of power. History shows that high-level foreign diplomatic intervention has been crucial in similar moments in Georgia's past.

This year, however, the dynamics are different, and foreign powers must tread carefully. Their role is not to interfere in the election results but to influence Ivanishvili's calculations, ensuring he can step down without feeling his survival is at risk. Timing, tactics, and pressure will matter enormously.

The Polling Landscape

Current polls in Georgia offer an unclear picture of the likely outcome of the elections. According to Edison Research, Georgian Dream is polling at 32.4%, a significant drop from its performance in the 2020 elections, where it secured nearly 48% of the vote. Meanwhile, the United National Movement (UNM) is polling around 20%. At the

same time, three other parties aim at double digits, reflecting a growing opposition coalition that could pose a severe challenge to GD's dominance.

The overall sentiment in the country is one of dissatisfaction. According to Edison Research, 63% of the population believes Georgia is headed in the wrong direction, and only 29% believe that the Georgian Dream deserves to remain in power. This suggests that opposition parties may have a real chance to challenge GD's dominance in the upcoming elections.

Foreign Actors and Power Transitions

Foreign powers have historically mediated political transitions in Georgia. In 2003, following the Rose Revolution, US Ambassador Richard Miles and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov played critical roles in securing Eduard Shevardnadze's resignation and his safety. Similarly, in 2012, when Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement lost to Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream, US Senators and European diplomats helped guide the process toward stability. The presence of high-level foreign figures provided security guarantees to the outgoing leaders, reducing the risks of a violent conflict or temptations to cling to power through unconstitutional instruments.



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This year, the stakes are higher. Ivanishvili's informal control over the state apparatus is deep-rooted, and there are signs that he fears losing not just political power but his wealth and personal security if his party is defeated. His political repressions, including the arrests of opposition figures and attempts to demonize civil society, suggest a man fearful of potential retribution. His perception of Western sanctions and criticism heightens this fear.

For Ivanishvili, the calculation is simple: If losing the election means losing everything, he may resort to undemocratic means to stay in power, a reality that political theorists have long observed in authoritarian settings. Leaders in precarious situations are more likely to hold onto power if they believe there is no safe exit.

Affecting (mis)Calculation

Political theorists have studied the behavior of leaders facing electoral defeat in regimes with both democratic and autocratic tendencies. Prospect theory by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky posits that individuals are more likely to take risks to avoid losses than to achieve gains. Applied to Ivanishvili's situation, if he perceives that losing an election poses an existential threat to his wealth or freedom (or even life), he may take extreme actions to avoid that loss, including holding onto power through unconstitutional means.

Furthermore, elite bargaining theorists, like Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, suggested almost a century ago that peaceful transitions of power are affected by the calculation of leaders. The transition will likely happen when leaders are given credible guarantees that their core interests—personal safety, wealth, and status—will be protected after they leave office. Without such guarantees, leaders like Ivanishvili may calculate that staying in power, even through force, is preferable to losing.

Several scenarios can be imagined in the immediate aftermath of the elections. In the first scenario, the Georgian Dream will win by a slight majority, which could raise questions about how legitimate the outcome was, considering the unfair pre-election environment, attack on the NGOs, hampering of the work of the monitoring organizations, and widespread vote-buying. In 2020, the crisis of legitimacy emerged when the opposition parties decided to boycott the Parliament after the election results were considered unfair. At that time, the US and EU ambassadors took the lead in mediating the political crisis, which culminated in the high-level involvement of European Council President Charles Michel. The Michel Agreement led to the opposition entering the Parliament, but the more significant longer-term provisions were not implemented since GD withdrew from the agreement in 2021.

If such a scenario repeats itself, the GD leader might miscalculate that arresting opposition parties or banning them, as they promised before the elections, could be a way out. This miscalculation can only be prevented by another diplomatic effort from the West.

In another scenario, the GD loses power as the opposition parties receive more support and the right to form a coalition government. In such a scenario, the GD leader could miscalculate that because he is poised to lose everything, a Belarus or Russia-type dictatorship could be a better alternative to ensure his safety. A diplomatic effort can also prevent this miscalculation from the West.

Who Can Influence Ivanishvili?

Not all international actors are in a position to influence Ivanishvili. In recent years, local ambassadors in Georgia have been targeted by the Georgian Dream and labeled as foreign actors attempting to interfere in domestic politics. For

example, the Estonian and Lithuanian Foreign ministers have been vocal critics of Georgia's democratic backsliding, but this has only led the ruling party to paint Eastern European diplomats as adversaries. Similarly, US officials, including the Senators who played some role in past transitions, face credibility challenges due to upcoming elections in the US, and their future involvement in Georgia is uncertain.

Even the European Union is in a precarious position. The European Council President Charles Michel, who mediated the 2021 political agreement between the opposition and GD, is set to step down, with António Costa slated to replace him. However, Costa's lack of experience mediating political crises means he may lack the necessary influence in Georgia. Furthermore, Michel's previous agreement ultimately failed, with both GD and the opposition rejecting the terms, damaging the EU's standing as a neutral actor.

An unexpected option could be Viktor Orbán, Hungary's Prime Minister, who has been an ally to illiberal leaders across Europe. While Orbán may seem like a figure Ivanishvili could trust, he is unlikely to be seen as a legitimate mediator by the opposition or Western powers. Furthermore, Orbán's past relationship with Georgia has been complicated by his government's sheltering of Georgian political exiles after 2012, potentially creating distrust between him and Ivanishvili.

The Most Credible Ones

Given the current landscape, three potential figures could influence Ivanishvili's calculations if he loses the elections.

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, has the authority and influence to offer political and economic incentives for a peaceful transition. However, her affiliation with

the European People's Party (EPP), historically supporting Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM), and her being considered an "enemy" by the GD may limit her perceived neutrality. Still, her strong personality and influence could be a tipping factor.

The British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, could be another foreign dignitary who could intervene. The UK is a credible actor and not embroiled in EU politics or Georgian politics. However, the British government has not been significantly involved in Georgia's recent political developments, which could limit its influence. In any case, the UK's role should not be underestimated.

Emmanuel Macron, President of France, stands out as the most credible figure. Ivanishvili holds French citizenship, and France has historically played a key role in mediating conflicts in Georgia, including during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, when then-President Nicolas Sarkozy brokered a ceasefire. Macron's relationship with Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili, who also has French roots and citizenship, further strengthens his position as a potential mediator.

The Power of (Timely) Diplomatic Presence

As Georgia heads toward potentially its most pivotal election since 2012, the stakes for democracy are high. A high-level foreign presence, particularly figures like Macron, could distinguish between a peaceful transition and a political crisis. This involvement, however, needs to be timely and swift. A week late or a week early could reinforce miscalculations. If the Georgian Dream loses, the foreign actors must offer Ivanishvili the guarantees he needs to step down peacefully. By influencing his calculations, they can help ensure that Georgia remains on the path to democracy rather than slipping into authoritarianism ■