

A Boat Race to Watch: Georgian Elections 2024

The race toward the October 2024 Parliamentary elections is drawing to an end and the five boats that will cross (or not) the finish line are already known. In fact, the boats are only two – Georgian Dream (GD) in one and all other opposition parties in another, even if they will run separately. What makes these elections unique is that every opposition party must also root for others to clear the 5% threshold. Otherwise, GD might stay in power.

Number 41, the Georgian Dream is poised to receive a plurality of votes, mainly drawing on administrative resources, public servants, and potent state propaganda. Number 5, the United National Movement Coalition, now encompassing several parties, Strategy the Aghmashenebeli and European Georgia, among others. UNM, which former President Mikheil Saakashvili backs, is highly likely to be the second-largest party elected in 2024.

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But the fate of the elections will be decided by parties number four, nine, and twenty-five. These are likely to be Coalition for Change (Ahali, Girchi-More Freedom, Droa, Republicans), Lelo (Anna Dolidze’s “For People” and Aleko Elisashvili’s Citizens”), and For Georgia of the former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia. Whether these three manage to clear the barrier, how many votes they get, and whether they can find modus vivendi with the UNM will determine how much longer the oligarchic rule stays in Georgia.

All other smaller opposition parties (Labor Party, Girchi, Federalists) will either squander 1-2% of votes if they decide to run or they will refrain from running. In fact, all other alternatives are already gone. The coalition-forming deadline has passed, and they will likely not join other party lists. Not running at all might be a financially hard decision since party financing in Georgia starts with 1% of electoral support. Thus, depending on how many micro-parties decide to run anyway, one can guess that up to 10% of the votes will be “lost,” i.e., go to those political forces that won’t clear the 5% threshold.



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Electoral Arithmetics

While many political analysts, especially politicians, despise electoral arithmetics, the numbers are pretty telling.

The support for the Georgian Dream has fluctuated among 800-900 thousand voters during the last decade; a lot less than 1.18 million were received in 2012. In 2016, Georgian Dream received 856.638 votes (48.7%), whereas UNM received 477.053 (27.11%). In the first round of the [2018 Presidential elections](#), GD-backed Salome Zourabichvili received 615.572 votes (38.64%), while her opponent, UNM's Gregory Vashadze garnered 601.224 votes (37.74%). The third candidate, European Georgia's David Bakradze, had 174.849 votes (10.97%). In the second round, however, the Georgian Dream mobilized all anti-UNM electorate through a formidable hate campaign, and the support for Zourabi-

chvili increased to 1.174.625 votes, enough to beat Vashadze's 780.635 votes.

In 2020, Georgian Dream [received](#) 928.004 votes (48.22%), whereas UNM tallied second with 27.18% and 523.127 votes. Third-placed European Georgia received 72.986 votes (3.79%), fourth-placed Lelo garnered 60.712 (3.15%), and fifth-placed Strategy the Builder – 60.671 (3.15%). Seventh place went to Girchi with 55.598 votes (2.89%) and eighth to Elisashvili's Citizens (25.508 votes and 1.33%).

In the 2021 local elections, the last major election held in Georgia, Georgian Dream [received](#) 46,75% (824.755 votes), with the UNM receiving 30,67% (541.188 votes). Giorgi Gakharia, GD's former PM, who left the party in 2021 and established "For Georgia," competed in the elections for the first time and garnered 7.81% (137.764 votes).

In 2024, electoral arithmetics tells us that several factors will be important to keep in mind.

First, it will be about the turnout. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the opposition-minded population did not go to the polls en masse; thus, the turnout was only 1.8 million. In 2012, when the Georgian Dream swept to power, the turnout was massive and the highest in the country's history. In 2012, 2.215 million people came to vote, and over 1.18 million [voted](#) for the Georgian Dream. The aforementioned electoral numbers show that the Georgian Dream can mobilize up to 900.000 voters. After Gakharia's departure in 2021, during extremely polarized local elections, because of Saakashvili's return and subsequent arrest, GD could not clear the 900.000 voters threshold. In fact, despite high polarization, GD [lost](#) local councils in several municipalities and even lost a mayorship in Tsalenjikha. But most worryingly, the races in the major cities except Tbilisi were lost or almost lost. GD [lost](#) the largest cities in the first rounds – Kutaisi (43.33% vs. 41.45%), Batumi (41.97% vs 41.08), Zugdidi (46.88% vs. 41.15%). In other major towns, GD had just a thin-air lead – Rustavi (44.84 vs. 43.54) and Telavi (46.75% vs. 45.43%).

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Thus, if the turnout in the 2024 Parliamentary elections stays under 2 million, the easy-to-get 900.000 votes might be sufficient for Ivanishvili to remain in power. However, if the younger generation, which is usually not keen to vote, and the migrant population go to the polls and the turnout is over 2 million, 900.000 voters might not be enough for GD to carry the elections. Migrants are especially important in this context. In the previous national elections, only two dozen thousand migrants bothered to vote. In many cases, they had

no money, means, or free days from work to travel hundreds of kilometers. This year, the same problem might persist. The Government is not keen on opening new polling stations in the cities where there are no Georgian consulates, even though, by law, they could do it. It is common knowledge that abroad, the Government will lose, like they did in previous elections. Thus, the decision of several hundred thousand Georgian emigres living outside the country might be vital for the outcome of the October elections.

Second, the 2024 elections will not have two rounds, which is great news for the opposition. Every run-off in the last decade has been a referendum on whether UNM should return to power, and in all cases, the GD won with effective negative propaganda about the “bloody nine years” when UNM ruled the country. In 2024, there will only be one round of voting, and if the opposition can replicate its success in major cities in 2021 or during the first round of presidential elections in 2018, the win could be within reach.

Third, since 2020/2021, GD's support in major cities, particularly in Tbilisi, has waned. During the 2023-2024 anti-Russian law demonstrations, most protesters were urban, and youth played a dominant role. Thus, whether the Georgian Dream will manage to turn back the youngsters away from the polling stations with the fear or despair message remains to be seen.

Programs vs Leaders

The Georgian elections are notorious for being a personal affair among two, or possibly more, party leaders. This leaves hardly any room for programmatic visions and program-oriented campaigns. These elections will be no exception.

The Georgian Dream has already brought back its heaviest fighter, Ivanishvili. Surprisingly, Ivanishvili is already involved in a tour of various towns in

the country where GD launches local-level campaigns. Speaking from a bulletproof glass aquarium with an anti-drone roof, GD's leader seems geared for the message and fight. The Georgian Dream's pre-election program has not been revealed. They promised to reveal it on October 1.

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However, the pre-election message for the GD is more than clear – GD [seeks](#) a constitutional majority to (a) outlaw collective UNM – i.e., all opposition parties; (b) outlaw gay propaganda; (c) upgrade the status of the Orthodox Church and (d) be ready for potential constitutional changes, in case if the Abkhazia issue is resolved. It does not matter that neither of these changes actually requires a constitutional majority; the message from Ivanishvili is clear – he wants *carte blanche* from the country to strengthen his authoritarian rule.

The Georgian opposition parties have recently developed a more organized and strategic approach, particularly as the 2024 elections drew nearer. One significant element of their strategy is a more robust grassroots campaign, where parties focus on reaching out directly to regional voters. This involves opening new party offices in smaller municipalities, organizing town hall meetings, and intensifying door-to-door campaigns.

In addition to strengthening their regional presence, the opposition parties have worked to consolidate their efforts by forming viable coalitions, recognizing that unity is essential to overcoming the 5% electoral threshold. One of the most notable developments is the United National Movement's [absorption](#) of Strategy Aghmashenebeli and European Georgia, strengthening their platform and broadening their appeal to different voter bases.

Other significant alliances include Lelo's union with Anna Dolidze's party, For People, which brings together a political voice known for advocating legal reforms and social justice. Lelo has also [formed](#) an alliance with Freedom Square, a movement led by Levan Tsutskiridze, a prominent NGO leader, which gives the coalition additional credibility in civil society circles. Furthermore, the inclusion of Aleko Elisashvili, a well-known politician and former Tbilisi mayoral candidate, further enhances this coalition's strength. Elisashvili's reputation for being an independent voice with strong anti-corruption credentials adds an additional layer of legitimacy to the opposition bloc. That he beat up a leading GD spokesman and was then beaten up by police only adds to his credentials.

The political party *Ahali*, formed recently by ex-political prisoner Nika Gvaramia and Nika Melia, both influential UNM leaders in the past, has found an [alliance](#) with *Girchi-More Freedom and Droa*, two small but vocal parties in Georgia's opposition landscape. This coalition is seen as a strategic effort to combine forces and appeal to a broader spectrum of voters, particularly those who lean toward progressive, libertarian, and pro-European values. By joining forces, *Ahali*, *Droa*, and *Girchi* aim to appeal to younger, more urban voters looking for alternatives to the dominant parties and who were active during the 2023 and 2023 anti-government protests.

Opportunities Missed

We can already say that several opportunities were missed in the ongoing pre-election campaign. First, the opposition parties failed to counter the GD with a single-party list. In a 5% electoral barrier model, this could have been the most efficient way to avoid wasting a single opposition vote. Rumors say that even Gakharia, who positions himself as the most anti-UNM in the opposition spectrum, was ready to join such a broad coalition of all opposition parties, granted that the UNM would

not have dominated the branding and party list.

Secondly, the Georgian president, Salome Zourabichvili, still has not endorsed any opposition party. It would have been easier for the President to throw her political weight behind the united opposition if they had managed to find a common ground. But now, Zourabichvili will either carry on with the anti-GD Campaign or consider endorsing either Lelo or For Georgia. Neither of these decisions will be optimal because, in reality, all four opposition centers are in the same boat. Even if one stays behind the 5% barrier, Georgian Dream would win the elections with a high likelihood.

Furthermore, it remains unclear whether the signing of the Georgian Charter—a document [proposed](#) by Zourabichvili in May—means that the political parties in the opposition spectrum actually agree on content. Gakharia's For Georgia [did not put](#) its signature under the document, disagreeing with some elements, such as a technical government and preparation for new elections.

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Thirdly, the opposition parties have so far failed to formulate a comprehensible and easy-to-understand message box on the social and economic problems that the population faces. The 'Europe vs. Russia' campaign might be profoundly successful in urban areas, but citizens care about their households in smaller municipalities and rural areas. Awkward attempts by some opposition forces, like Lelo, to promise to increase pensions to 1.000 GEL (330 Euros) are usually met with mockery since the budgetary calculations do not withhold criticism when such a dramatic rise in expenditures is planned.

Fourthly, the opposition has yet to find an easy and credible answer to the outrageous allegation from the Georgian Dream that if the opposition wins, Russia will start the war. The absurdity of the claim is not an argument to ignore it because the GD has capitalized on the fear of war quite successfully and plans to do the same this October.

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Finally, the opposition is yet to show its strength. The concerns that some of the opposition parties might not be able to clear the barrier are still present. Many opposition-minded voters will make their choices based on the assumption that their votes won't be lost. In the past, this meant that the UNM Coalition benefited from such thinking. However, this year around, UNM and Ahali will very likely clear the 5%. This leaves Lelo and Gakharia's For Georgia. The voters will have to decide whether to gamble with their vote, possibly assisting these parties to clear the barrier or whether to play safe. Neither is an optimal solution. As Jaba Devdariani explained in this volume, strategic voting in Georgia is a lot harder than in other places like France.

What to Watch Out for Before the Elections Day?

A few highlights in September-October will have a major influence on how the elections end.

It must be clear to everyone that the scope of affected persons through the Transparency of Foreign Influence law, as well as potential anti-opposition sanctions in the aftermath of the elections, appears to be so large that it will hardly leave any family affected.

The Transparency of Foreign Influence law kicked in on September 2, which means that within the next two months, most, if not all, prominent civil society and media actors will be fined and under pressure to cease their operations. The Constitutional Court is yet to decide on the Presidential and Civil Society Organizations' appeal to suspend the law as unconstitutional. The crippling of the civil society organizations will definitely affect the political opposition too. How the opposition parties react and capitalize on this will largely determine the extent of their support in October. It must be clear to everyone that the scope of affected persons through the Transparency of Foreign Influence law, as well as potential anti-opposition sanctions in the aftermath of the elections, appears to be so large that it will hardly leave any family unaffected. The sooner the opposition realizes this and rallies people against Ivanishvili's authoritarian trend, the bigger the chance of GD's failure to monopolize power will be.

Secondly, the two months before the elections are usually when the "war of kompromats" starts. Opposition and civil society leaders are expecting that the State Security Service will step up investigations on the alleged but never-even-close-to-proven cases of *coup d'etat*. And then, there are always real or concocted phone taps or even sex videos, even though we have not seen those in quite a while.

Thirdly, the opposition parties must consider how they plan to present the next government. Yes, they are in the same boat, but they have so far failed to agree to a common cabinet. There is still time for a joint cabinet showing strength, ability, and professionalism. However, in case of failure, all opposition parties will come up with their own Prime Ministerial candidates. This is given that

the Georgian Dream does not participate in political debates; only intra-opposition debates will take place. Whether such debates cumulatively strengthen the opposition is dubious.

A fourth vital aspect to look for is which of the opposition parties will manage to demonstrate that their support is significant. In the pre-election environment, this is usually done through large rallies and demonstrations. Ideally, all of the opposition could gather at the joint rally in Tbilisi to show how 2-3 hundred thousand people come out in the streets gearing up for GD's defeat. Matching this number quickly will be extremely hard for the GD.

Fifthly, the West has lost leverage over the Georgian Dream by now. We have been [warning](#) about this as early as March. In the remaining two months, the West might not have leverage over the Georgian Dream, but it could still help Georgian people with a few wake-up calls. The Commission's Enlargement report, due to be issued in early October, must repeat what the EU leaders have said all along – that Georgia's European path is blocked by the Georgian Dream. If the individual EU states come up with targeted personal sanctions, it would be even better for dormant and hesitant Georgians to decide in favor of European integration.

And finally, Georgians are used to one-person, one-party rules. Every single administration until today was like that. Now, the recipe for the opposition's success is a coalition of pro-European parties, which has never happened before. Thus, it will be up to the opposition parties to show the population that coalition rule has its benefits. Georgian voters need to hear the success stories of the coalition rule and agreements, not after but before the elections ■