

# Watching the Wrong Game: How Digital Authoritarians Outpace Election Monitors

**E**lection observation missions led by Western countries remain anchored in methodologies designed for 20th-century elections. Short-term missions mainly focus on ensuring the integrity of election-day activities, such as preventing intimidation, vote-buying, and ballot stuffing at polling stations. In contrast, long-term missions are oriented on electoral legislation, procedural issues, and conventional monitoring of mass media coverage during pre-election campaigns.

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tion is increasingly tied to sophisticated means of controlling societies, mainly through dominating information ecosystems and cyberspace - manipulations that occur well before election day and beyond official procedures. Constrained by outdated mandates and tools, observer missions are often ill-equipped to detect and address these modern forms of electoral manipulation. Consequently, they usually fail to recognize digital malpractices, inadvertently legitimizing rigged election outcomes and the authoritarian regimes behind them. There is an apparent urgent need for the approach to election observation to evolve.

Georgia is a textbook example of how the ruling regime has transformed state capture into electoral victories despite widespread public discontent and the low approval of its policies. Building on previous experience, it is highly likely that Georgia could become a textbook example of how



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international observation missions might overlook the inherently rigged election because they are watching the wrong game.

The muted reaction from Western allies to Georgia's contentious 2020 parliamentary elections left the country's pro-Western population deeply frustrated. Although the West acknowledged some irregularities, its evaluation was primarily bureaucratic, asserting insufficient solid legal evidence to prove widespread fraud. The joint US-EU [state-ment](#) called for a "credible and inclusive legal process" to address substantiated electoral violations. However, local election monitors [reported](#) that the central election committee and courts unjustifiably dismissed nearly all complaints. As the lines between the ruling party and the state went from blurry to non-existent, state authorities disregarded and mishandled thousands of documented evidence collected by civil society organizations.

## State Control

The [state capture](#) and [election manipulation](#) pattern has been extensively covered in previous editions of this journal. By the time of the pre-election period in 2024, the Georgian Dream party had completed the state capture, establishing effective control over all three branches of power, state institutions, regulatory bodies, and budgetary structures:

First, despite his minimal involvement in public politics, Bidzina Ivanishvili effectively controls the executive branch in Georgia. In a single-party government fully dominated by the Georgian Dream, Ivanishvili exerts influence through all key political appointments of people, like Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri, who are unconditionally loyal and, at the same time, have close ties to his business empire. On top of the law enforcement,

prosecution, investigative agencies, and special services, all state companies and regulatory bodies are governed by the regime's loyalists. A notorious example is the [abolishment](#) of the entire institution of the State Inspector's Service because its leadership did not bow to the Georgian Dream's guidelines. The last sprinkle of complete control over the executive branch is the presidency. President Salome Zourabichvili faces severe procedural restrictions and pressure for positions that diverge from the Georgian Dream's agenda, even on the actions falling under her direct responsibilities.

Second, in the legislative branch, the Georgian Dream dominates the Parliament, controlling all key positions and marginalizing the genuine opposition. The ruling party has weakened parliamentary pluralism by supporting pseudo-opposition parties like the European Socialists, which dilutes the influence of actual opposition members. Additionally, dissenting MPs face severe suppression, as seen when opposition members were forcibly removed from the parliamentary premises during debates. The ruling majority has enough votes to overcome the presidential veto, which is the only mechanism that could potentially restrict the Georgian Dream's legislative appetite. As a result, the regime can pass even the most controversial legislative initiatives, such as the Russian law on foreign agents, further consolidating its grip on state control.

Third, the Georgian Dream has captured the judicial branch through strategic appointments to key judicial positions and the High Council of Justice. Loyalists like Levan Murusidze, who are at the same time discredited in Georgian society and sanctioned by international partners, have been appointed to control politically sensitive cases, ensuring the judiciary serves the ruling party's interests. The Constitutional Court and prosecution service have also been politicized, with decisions favoring the Georgian Dream, effectively under-

mining judicial independence and reinforcing the party's power across all branches of government. Total control over the judiciary and courts is the ultimate guarantee of state capture and, by design, excludes the possibility of a democratic and competitive political playfield in the country.

## Election Manipulation Combo

The State Security Service of Georgia (also known as the SSSG, or SUSI in Georgian) has successfully translated the Georgian Dream's state capture into electoral success. The SUSI has engaged in extensive surveillance and intimidation of opposition figures and civil society, including organizing violent attacks and fabricating narratives about foreign interference to discredit opponents. Additionally, the regime has systematically used state resources to influence voters by offering benefits such as pardons, early release from prison, and fine amnesty in exchange for electoral support. Combined with control over electoral administration by placing loyalists in key positions within the Central Election Commission (CEC) and district commissions, manipulating voter lists, and tampering with ballots, these tactics have severely undermined the integrity of Georgia's democratic processes and elections. The Georgian Dream party has adeptly employed vote-buying and fear campaigns alongside administrative resources to manipulate election outcomes.

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Some key figures illustrate the significant impact of the misuse of administrative resources and the intimidation and vote-buying of vulnerable segments of the electorate on the election outcomes in Georgia. The state is the biggest employer with

a steadily [increasing](#) number of civil servants. Currently, 308,000 employees receive their salaries from the state budget, including 63,700 [teachers](#), 37,000 personnel from the Ministry of Defense and [Armed Forces](#), and 23,700 from the Ministry of Interior and the Police. Additionally, there are vulnerable segments of society that rely entirely on government services, including 672,000 citizens living below the poverty threshold whose only income is state allowances and 32,000 prisoners or individuals on [probation](#). During previous elections, civil society organizations consistently [reported](#) that the Georgian Dream engaged in vote-buying and used intimidation tactics to coerce these vulnerable voters and their family members. This demographic represents over one million voters, accounting for approximately 30% of over 3.5 million voters registered for the last parliamentary elections. This significant advantage distorts the election environment. These manipulation tactics occur mainly through digital means and mostly stay below the radar of the election observer missions.

## Information Ecosystem and Cyberspace

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Alongside vote-buying, intimidation, and the misuse of administrative resources, the Georgian Dream party has effectively utilized polarization in the media environment as a critical tool to manipulate election outcomes. Polarization is rooted in the ruling party's strategy of demonizing the opposition, particularly the United National Movement (UNM), through negative PR campaigns, physi-

cal assaults, and arrests of opposition figures. By branding the UNM as a public enemy and equating all the opposition forces and critical voices with it, the Georgian Dream exacerbates societal divisions. This strategy is aimed at demonizing not only the UNM but all opposition parties, critical media, and civil society organizations. Just recently, the ruling party leaders publicly [confessed](#) that the Georgian Dream seeks a constitutional majority in the next parliamentary elections to abolish the 'collective' UNM and get rid of all political opponents.

Despite the apparent diversity in the Georgian media landscape, the ruling regime still manages to control the information space through polarization and the harassment of the critical media. According to recent [reports](#), while Georgia's media environment remains pluralistic and diverse to some extent, the regime is steadily increasing its control over the information ecosystem, leading to a rapid deterioration in press freedom rankings. A significant portion of broadcasters either directly support the government (such as TV Imedi, PostTV, Georgia's Public Broadcaster, and Rustavi 2) or indirectly promote the regime's agenda through pro-Russian content (such as Obieqtivi TV and Alt-Info). On the other hand, opposition media outlets (like TV Mtavari, TV Pirveli, TV Formula, and Kavkasia TV) offer a critical counter-narrative, but they operate under constant threat and pressure from the regime. Polarization is particularly problematic because it stifles meaningful public debate; government representatives boycott critical media and prevent opponents and critics from accessing state-controlled outlets.

Furthermore, the regime's refusal to engage in debates with political opponents, coupled with the consolidation of their hostile narratives, hate speech and calls for violence through controlled media, ensure that dissenting voices are marginalized. Intimidation of the critical press is another significant issue, with state authorities misusing

regulatory, legal, and financial tools to suppress opposition-aligned outlets. Owners and managers of these media organizations are frequently [sub-jected](#) to investigations and legal proceedings.

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In addition to controlling traditional media, the regime has turned to social media and digital tools as powerful instruments to fuel polarization, [spread](#) disinformation, and [incite](#) hate speech and violence against its opponents. The ruling Georgian Dream party has increasingly adopted Russian disinformation tactics to dominate the information space by weaponizing the internet. The Georgian Dream's disinformation machine, bolstered by Russian digital experts, leverages fake news, fake accounts, and cross-platform manipulation to sustain a pro-Russian agenda within Georgia. Meta's recent [report](#) exposed a sophisticated network of coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) linked to Russian marketing firms, like IMA Digital, which flooded social media with fake accounts and misleading content designed to prop up the ruling party. This network, originating in Russia, targeted Georgia through a web of fictitious news websites and fake social media profiles that [disseminated](#) pro-government narratives while vilifying the opposition, particularly during the protests against the "foreign agents law." These operations were not isolated but were part of a broader Russian strategy to keep the Georgian Dream in power by manipulating public opinion and undermining Western influence. The involvement of the Moscow-based IMA Digital highlights the deepening connection between the Georgian Dream and Russian interests, which is expected to intensify as the

parliamentary elections approach. The strategic use of fake accounts, news, and coordinated campaigns is shaping political discourse and ensuring that the Georgian Dream stays in power and, thus, Georgia remains within Russia's sphere of influence.

## Completing the Puzzle

The Georgian Dream's control over Georgia's executive, legislative, and judicial branches represents a near-total consolidation of power, effectively dismantling the country's democratic framework. However, civil society and the media have shown remarkable resilience against the ruling regime's control. This is why, in the lead-up to the elections, the Georgian Dream government is hastily pushing forward with implementing the controversial Russian-style "foreign agents" law. The Venice Commission [concluded](#) that the restrictions set by the law on the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and privacy are incompatible with democratic standards and undermine both the financial stability and the credibility of the targeted organizations and their operations. It also concludes that the burdensome reporting and constant surveillance will, without a doubt, complicate and threaten the effective operation and existence of broadcasters, online media, and civil society organizations. Moreover, as a sign of total control, the last-minute [changes](#) in the draft bill will allow the authorities to target private individuals at their discretion.

Evidencing the regime's intention to use Russian law to alter the pre and post-election environment, Justice Minister Rati Bregadze issued a [de-crete](#) on 29 July establishing a Department for Financial Reporting under the National Agency for Public Registry to enforce this law, starting on 1 August. The department will handle the registration and monitoring of civil society organizations (CSOs) that receive foreign funding, with the power to enforce registration and impose fines. De-

spite the widespread opposition from CSOs, which refuse voluntary registration, the government is proceeding with measures that critics view as an effort to silence dissent and control the flow of foreign aid. The Speaker of Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, reinforced this agenda by emphasizing that registration is necessary for transparency, dismissing concerns about the law's repressive nature. This move is part of a broader strategy to stifle criticism and consolidate power ahead of the upcoming elections.

Another sign of the Georgian Dream's intention to dominate the pre-election environment at all costs is Speaker Papuashvili's [announcement](#) about the creation of a public database targeting individuals allegedly involved in violence, threats, or supporting such actions, openly declaring that the intent is to silence the massive public discontent and harsh criticism directed at Georgian Dream MPs who voted for the Russian law. The announcement coincided with a warning from the State Security Service about potential civil unrest provoked by protests against the Russian law. While authorities will address criminal and administrative violations, Papuashvili stressed that instances of verbal violence and blackmail, which do not fall under criminal law, should be morally assessed by society. He emphasized that people often refrain from making inflammatory statements publicly but express them privately, mistakenly believing that their hateful rhetoric, including "fascist calls for exclusion," is confined to private conversations. Papuashvili argued that these statements, made on social media, are not private but public declarations that fuel hatred, social division, and moral terror against others and their families. Focusing on a public endorsement of criticism, this initiative amounts to moral policing and marks a significant step toward digital authoritarianism. This move, aimed at controlling and intimidating citizens, mainly those critical of the regime, represents a dangerous attempt to stifle free speech and dissent, especially in the pre-election period.

## Winning in 2024

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To effectively counter the Georgian Dream's election manipulation in the upcoming October elections, it is essential to rethink and extend the scope, mandate, and approach of election observation missions. This shift is necessary to address the inefficiencies and shortcomings observed in previous missions. Traditional methodologies, which often focus on surface-level monitoring, must evolve to tackle the increasingly sophisticated and covert tactics used to manipulate public opinion and election outcomes.

More specifically, it is crucial to leverage the traceability of these campaigns within cyberspace and information ecosystems. This presents a unique opportunity to expose and effectively challenge the regime's tactics. Central to this effort is the need for increased support from local watchdogs and civil society organizations, which play a pivotal role in uncovering and documenting manipulation efforts. However, it is imperative that the evidence they collect is utilized more strategically and effectively.

One critical recommendation is to shift from the traditional focus on mass media monitoring to a broader approach that includes gathering evidence from social media, communication apps, and online groups. This would allow a more comprehensive understanding of how disinformation and manipulation efforts are executed. Additionally, documenting instances of voter intimidation, such as coercive messages from school directors

or pressure on state allowance beneficiaries, should be prioritized and recognized as significant violations in observer reports.

Equally important is the need to document both direct and indirect forms of electoral manipulation. This includes recording incidents of vote-buying, such as the distribution of food, money, or other benefits, as well as pre-election initiatives like debt forgiveness, salary increases, and gifts to celebrities loyal to the regime. These activities should be flagged as serious violations and included in election observation reports.

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Moreover, official statements from political leaders and senior civil servants that include hate speech, stigmatization, or calls for violence against opponents must be registered as violations. Monitoring the social media activities of political figures and identifying coordinated inauthentic behavior, particularly those involving civil servants, should also be an integral part of the observation process.

Finally, it is crucial that election observation reports move beyond merely listing individual shortcomings. Instead, they must assess the cumulative impact of these violations on the overall election outcome. Failure to do so risks legitimizing manipulated elections and undermining the democratic process. By adopting these recommendations, there is a better chance of ensuring a more transparent, fair, and democratic electoral process in Georgia ■