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Our Mission

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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual exchange, nurturing a communal space where each person can contribute meaningfully to the broader geopolitical discourse.

In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOPolitics* will echo the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia can and must contribute to disseminating universal democratic values and contribute to regional and international security. We aim to support these goals through our analytical and intellectual contributions.

We have assembled a team of experts and contributors with deep knowledge and policy experience who will enrich the conversation about Georgia's foreign and security policy, unveiling and scrutinizing Georgia's relations with the EU, NATO, Russia, and other important geopolitical actors and international institutions. We will also investigate the ramifications of internal developments for Georgia's geopolitical role and foreign relations. By doing so, we will facilitate informed and substantial dialogue from, about and in Georgia.



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Contributors



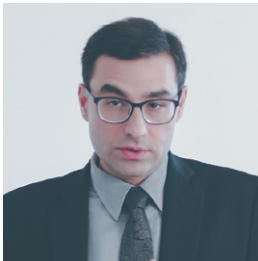
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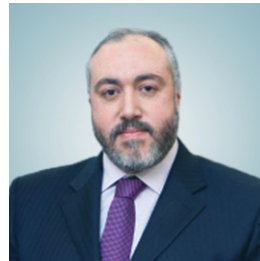
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Hans Gutbrod Guest Contributor

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Georgia's Mafia-Style Electoral Rigging: A Gift to Russia, A Headache for the West

The morning after Georgia's October 26 parliamentary elections, the country awoke to a disturbing reality: official results showed the ruling Georgian Dream party securing 53.9% of the vote. This number seemed plucked from the Kremlin's playbook of election manipulation. However, the result was not simply a matter of fudging the final tally; it was an outcome of a sophisticated and multi-layered strategy designed to appear legitimate while manipulating every facet of the electoral process. Georgia is now poised for a protracted political crisis and faces uncertain months of street protests, repressions, further radicalization, alienation from the European future, and rapprochement with Russia. The aftermath has left Georgia's friends in the West with a troubling question: how to respond to a democratic façade masking an increasingly autocratic state?

This 12th issue of *GEOPOLITICS* is fully dedicated to the October 2024 elections and its intricacies. We explain what happened, why it happened, and what options Western allies have for grappling with Georgia's deepening political crisis.

Hans Gutbrod opens the volume with a forensic analysis of Georgia's electoral fraud, exposing the sophisticated tactics the ruling party employed. Gutbrod details systematic voter manipulation, including vote buying, data collection on vulnerable populations, and control of state resources. His statistical examination uncovers clear irregular patterns, undermining the vote's integrity and confirming suspicions of widespread electoral fraud. Gutbrod's piece sets the stage for under-

standing the broader context of the elections as a cynical power grab rather than a reflection of the popular will.

Sergi Kapanadze follows with an incisive look into the elections, comparing it to a meticulously executed special operation by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, featuring a multi-layered strategy involving extensive preparation, psychological manipulation, centralized command, and tactical deception. The result was marred by manipulation, vote-buying, ID confiscation, and carousel voting schemes, leading to a stark disconnect between the official results and the genuine will of the Georgian people. Kapanadze concludes that the scale of the fraud and the active support from Moscow leave Georgia's political future uncertain, heightening the risk of a prolonged crisis and further distancing the country from its Euro-Atlantic path.

Ghia Nodia's contribution examines the broader implications of the 2024 elections, arguing that they mark a decisive shift in Georgia's geopolitical orientation from a European state into an Eurasian one. Nodia contends that the Georgian Dream's embrace of Eurasian-style governance reflects a growing alignment with Russian interests, effectively sidelining the country's European aspirations. The article explores the erosion of Western influence and the implications of this shift for Georgia's civil society, which now faces increasing pressure from an authoritarian government. Nodia warns that while Georgia's drift toward Eurasia is concerning, the ultimate trajectory will depend on the resilience of local pro-democracy forces and the region's evolving political dynamics.

Jaba Devdariani's article offers a critical dissection of Bidzina Ivanishvili's "war apology" speech, delivered during the campaign as a cynical ploy to rewrite the narrative of the 2008 war with Russia. Devdariani argues that the speech, which blamed the opposition United National Movement (UNM) for the conflict while omitting any mention of Russian aggression, serves as a dangerous alignment with Kremlin propaganda and has far-reaching consequences for Georgia's national interests. Ivanishvili's rhetoric, according to Devdariani, does not genuinely aim at reconciliation but is part of a broader strategy to frame the opposition as the enemy and justify increasingly autocratic policies, risking Georgia's Euro-Atlantic future in favor of short-term political consolidation.

Shota Gvineria's analysis shifts the focus to Western misconceptions about Georgia's political landscape. By answering frequently asked (naïve) questions about Georgia, he explains paradoxes such as the solid pro-European public sentiment juxtaposed with the electoral success of the Russia-leaning Georgian Dream. Gvineria urges Western policymakers to see beyond the surface-level narratives and adopt a more nuanced strategy that addresses the underlying authoritarian practices threatening Georgia's democratic aspirations.

Denis Cenusă provides a comparative perspective by analyzing the post-election trajectories of Georgia and Moldova. The latter, unlike Georgia, managed to walk a tightrope, surviving Russian interference in its presidential elections and pro-Europe referendum. While Moldova has fended off (at least for now) Russian influence through decisive pro-European victories, Cenusă highlights how Georgia's contentious election results deepen political polarization and push the country closer to Moscow's orbit. The article contrasts the clear EU support for Moldova with the West's hesitant response to Georgia's crisis,

warning that failure to take a firm stance could allow Russia to exploit the situation further and destabilize the region.

Thornike Gordadze continues the comparisons between Moldova and Georgia, calling for an urgent paradigm shift in the EU's approach to counteract the escalating Russian influence in the region. He contrasts Moldova's success in resisting overt Russian interference with Georgia's quiet descent into state capture under Bidzina Ivanishvili. Gordadze calls for the EU to take bold, proactive measures reminiscent of the Marshall Plan era, including recognizing Georgia's disputed election results as illegitimate. This, he argues, is essential to counter Russia's hybrid warfare tactics and protect the EU's strategic interests.

Vano Chkhikvadze continues with the critique of the EU's vacillating approach between normative power and geopolitical pragmatism. He argues that the EU once again faces a familiar dilemma: whether to play geopolitics or stick to a normative agenda. EU's previous decision to grant Georgia candidate status without substantial reforms signaled a troubling shift towards prioritizing geopolitical stability over democratic principles. This leniency has emboldened the ruling party, which now leverages EU fears of Russian influence to justify its authoritarian tactics. Chkhikvadze urges the EU to reassert its commitment to democratic norms through targeted sanctions and symbolic actions, warning that further compromises will only legitimize Georgia's slide into autocracy.

Temuri Yakobashvili closes the issue with a call for a robust response from the United States and Western democracies to counter the hybrid warfare tactics evident in Georgia's 2024 elections. Yakobashvili outlines a comprehensive strategy, including external investigations into electoral fraud, targeted sanctions against key figures like Ivanishvili, and increased support for civil soci-

ety. He warns that failing to act decisively will embolden authoritarian regimes, granting them a “license to steal” elections and eroding the very foundations of democracy. Yakobashvili’s conclusion is clear: only a coordinated and assertive approach can safeguard Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic trajectory and restore faith in democratic processes.

As this issue illustrates, the 2024 Georgian elections were not merely flawed; they represented a calculated and systematic effort to undermine democracy, aligning Georgia’s future more closely with Russia’s autocratic model. The challenge now lies with the West: will it respond with decisive action to defend its values, or will it allow Georgia to slip further into the grip of a mafia-style governance that serves Moscow’s interests? The stakes could not be higher.

As we close the first year of *GEOpolitics*, we take stock of an intense journey through the region’s and Georgia’s most pressing issues—from the geopolitical chessboard that defines the South Caucasus to the complex dynamics of Georgia’s EU aspirations, the shifting influences of great powers, and the rise of hybrid threats, mainly from Russia. We’ve tackled topics ranging from electoral manipulation and state capture to disinformation warfare and civil society resistance, offering our readers in-depth analysis, firsthand

accounts, and diverse perspectives on the challenges facing Georgia and its neighbors.

Our previous covers, depicting various games—from chess and Jenga to Olympic sports and the deceptive Night of Mafia—captured the strategic maneuvering and power plays shaping Georgia’s political landscape. Now the games are over (figuratively, of course), but the stakes have only increased. The fraudulent October elections have pushed the country into uncharted territory, where the next moves are anything but clear. The dramatic twists ahead call for a new approach. Starting with our next issue, we’ll move from the realm of games to the world of cinema, drawing inspiration from iconic movie posters. We promise to keep our covers as entertaining and sharp as ever because what’s unfolding in Georgia might soon resemble a thriller, a political drama, or even a dystopian saga (hopefully with a happy end). We’ll continue to tell the story with the same incisive analysis you’ve come to expect. So, stay tuned—the real show might just be beginning ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

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How Georgia's 2024 Elections Were Systematically Rigged – A Look at the Numbers

There is sufficient evidence to conclude that the official results of the Georgian Parliamentary election do not reflect the will of the Georgian people. The elections were systematically rigged to ensure an overwhelming majority for the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party in the next parliament. The rigging relied on vote buying, mass intimidation, and direct electoral manipulation.

The election needs to be seen in the context of a broader capture of key state institutions, especially since 2021, that has also been reflected in downgrades of Georgia's democracy scores across all respectable ratings. In recent years, Georgia's *Freedom in the World* score has [declined](#) from 64 to 58 on a 100-point scale. The *Bertelsmann Transformation Index* [notes](#) a decline in Georgia's democracy scores from 6.36 in 2020 to 5.65 in 2024 on a 10-point scale and a fall from position 43 to 54 in its overall transformation rating. In recent months,

the law on “transparency of foreign influence” has further constrained civic space.

This article is a shortened and adapted version of a longer [policy brief](#) that synthesized available analysis. Two colleagues currently affiliated with other organizations and institutions contributed extensively and led the statistical analysis. They bring a combined experience of more than 25 years in statistical analysis in the context of elections. Multiple people kindly contributed details, insight, and analysis to this piece, which seeks to provide critical numbers for quantification, highlight other analyses, and add statistical analysis.

Deviation from Previous Results and Trend Lines

To start with, the officially announced results of the 2024 parliamentary elections defy basic plausibility. According to official results, the Georgian



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	2016	2020	2024
Georgian Dream %	48.68	48.22	53.93
Georgian Dream votes	856,638	928,004	1,119,946

Dream supposedly improved its 48.2% electoral result from 2020 to 53.9% in 2024. This means it claims to have mobilized an additional 191,942 voters, an additional 11% to their previous vote. These numbers also exceeded the GD’s 2016 results (see the table above).

All credible evidence suggests that results should have gone in the opposite direction, towards a reduction of the Georgian Dream’s support. Exit polls and pre-election surveys also put the opposition parties ahead.

Multi-Pronged Assault on Free and Fair Elections

Overall, the rigging relied on bribery on an unprecedented scale, mass intimidation, and some electoral manipulation. That manipulation, in turn, drew on a purposeful undermining of the secrecy of the vote and mass surveillance at various levels. There is not necessarily a single story to the rigging as responsibility for its execution was with regional and district coordinators. Still, looking at the numbers helps to get a sense of what happened.

A critical component was that the authorities knew precisely which voters to target. Using a snowball scheme, civil servants especially were asked to report on people in their personal sur-

roundings. With more than 320,000 people working in the public sector in the country, constituting about 22% of the country’s formal workforce, a few rounds of this snowball data collection [provided](#) extensive coverage across Georgia.

A critical component was that the authorities knew precisely which voters to target. Using a snowball scheme, civil servants especially were asked to report on people in their personal surroundings.

As it appears, the data was aggregated systematically, with the newspaper *Batumelebi* [reporting](#) in mid-October that Georgian Dream offices were processing the personal information of at least tens of thousands of individuals. The data seen by *Batumelebi* included information on health issues, drug addiction, participation in past elections, votes in past elections, and voting intention for every voter in the target region. The assumption is that at least some of that data was furnished by other state authorities without citizens’ consent.

While snowball mobilization schemes were previously used, the “bring or at least identify ten people” campaign seems to have been a core pillar of this election’s mobilization effort. According to plausible accounts, these were the main targets (see the table below).

Targets for Snowball Mobilization	
Public Sector Employees	320,000
Adult Recipients of Targeted Social Assistance	415,000
Voters in Areas with a Majority Ethnic Minority Population	340,000
Incarcerated People	9,800
People on Probation	22,000

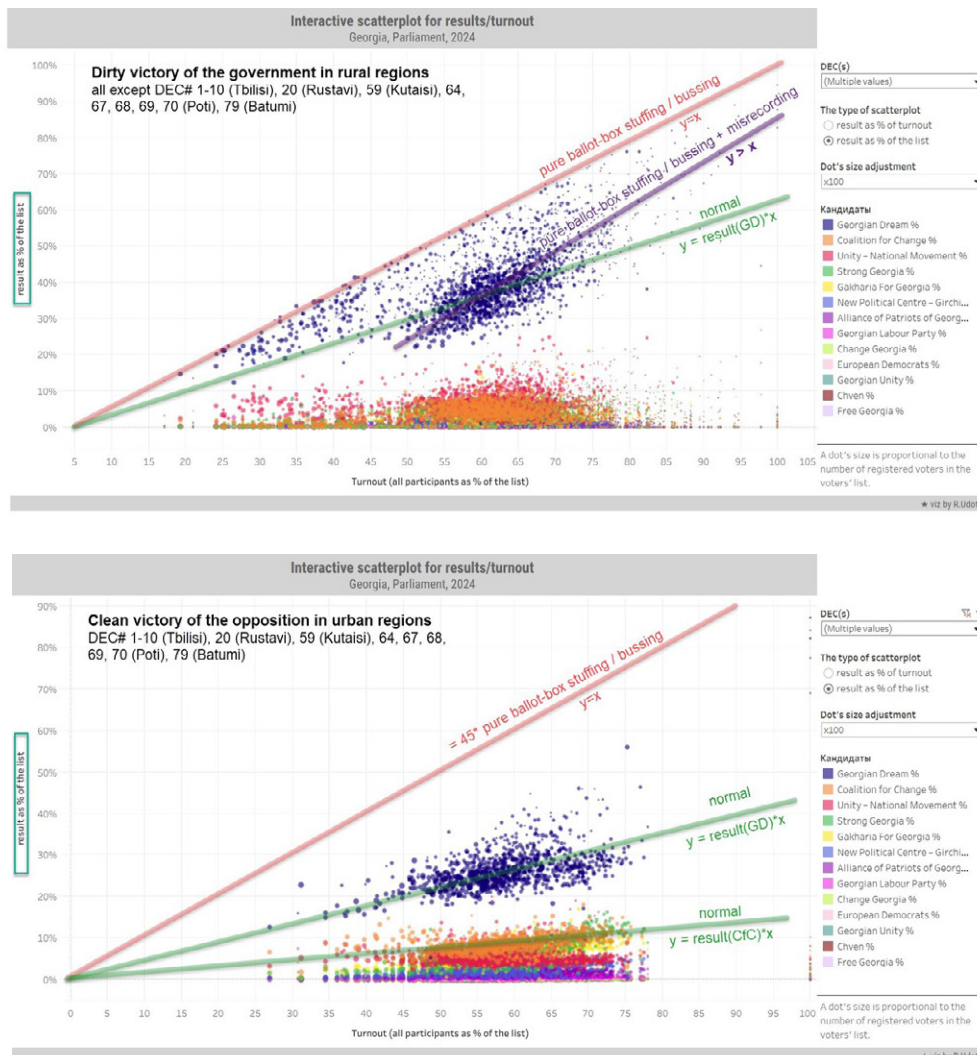
Not every person in these groups will have been contacted. Still, these categories seemed to be priority targets for the Georgian Dream’s coordinators next to private sector firms aligned with the government. With this snowball scheme as a major feature, the supposed mobilization of tens of thousands of additional voters is explicable. However, the distribution across the target groups is not yet clear. Parties in other countries also try to reach voters – but consent for data use is essential, and the use of private data for purposes of coercion crosses the line towards manipulation.

Kvirkvelia and Roman Udote shows that as turnout increased, there was a larger increase in the share of votes that went to the Georgian Dream. This [pattern is consistent](#) with vote buying, intimidation, busing voters to a precinct, multiple voting, and/or other efforts that would cause anomalously high vote shares in specific precincts. No credible evidence has been provided to suggest that these results were primarily delivered through legitimate tactics such as block voting.

Statistical Analyses Challenge Official Results

Udote’s analysis demonstrates the sharp contrast between key urban regions and other parts of Georgia.

A statistical analysis conducted by Levan



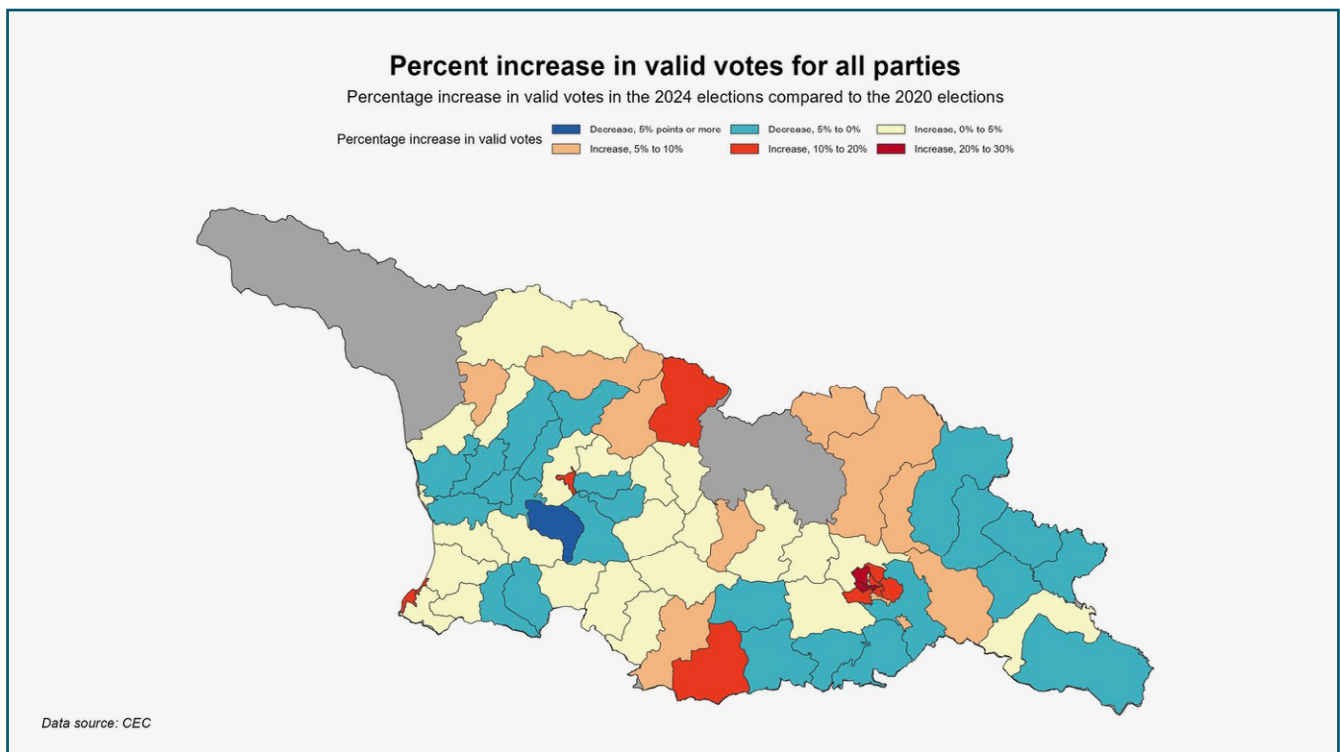
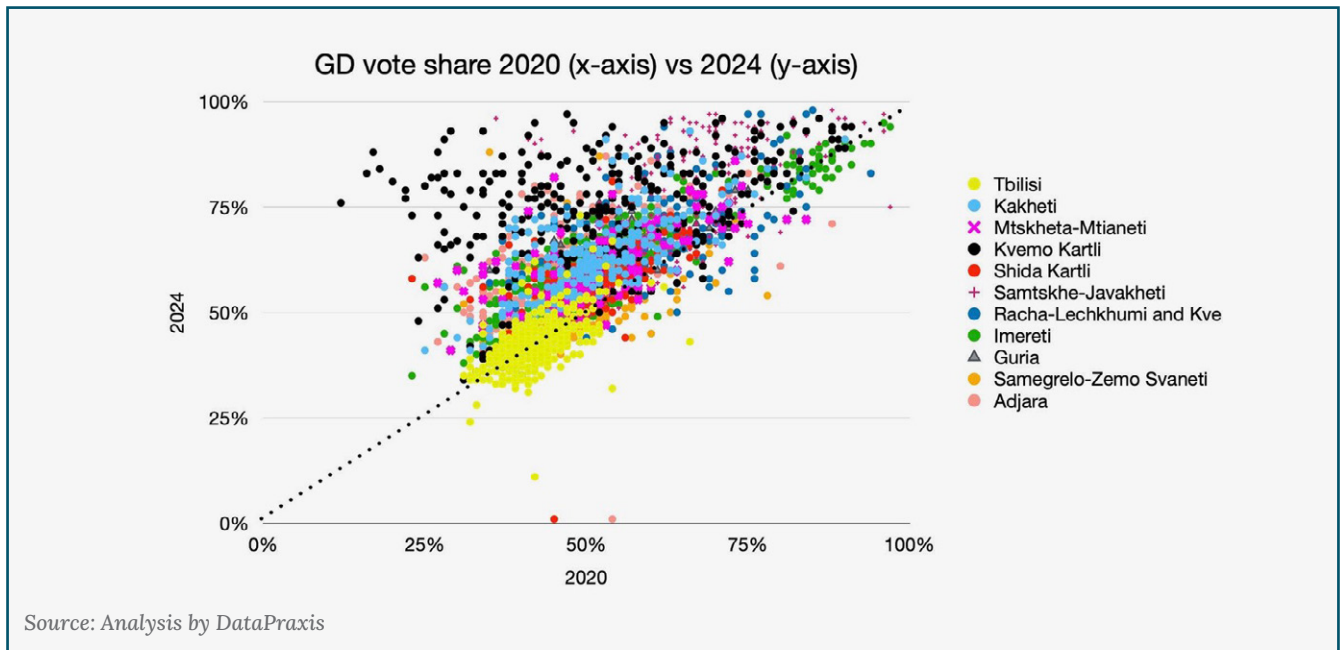
Udote: reproduced from the [Insider](#)

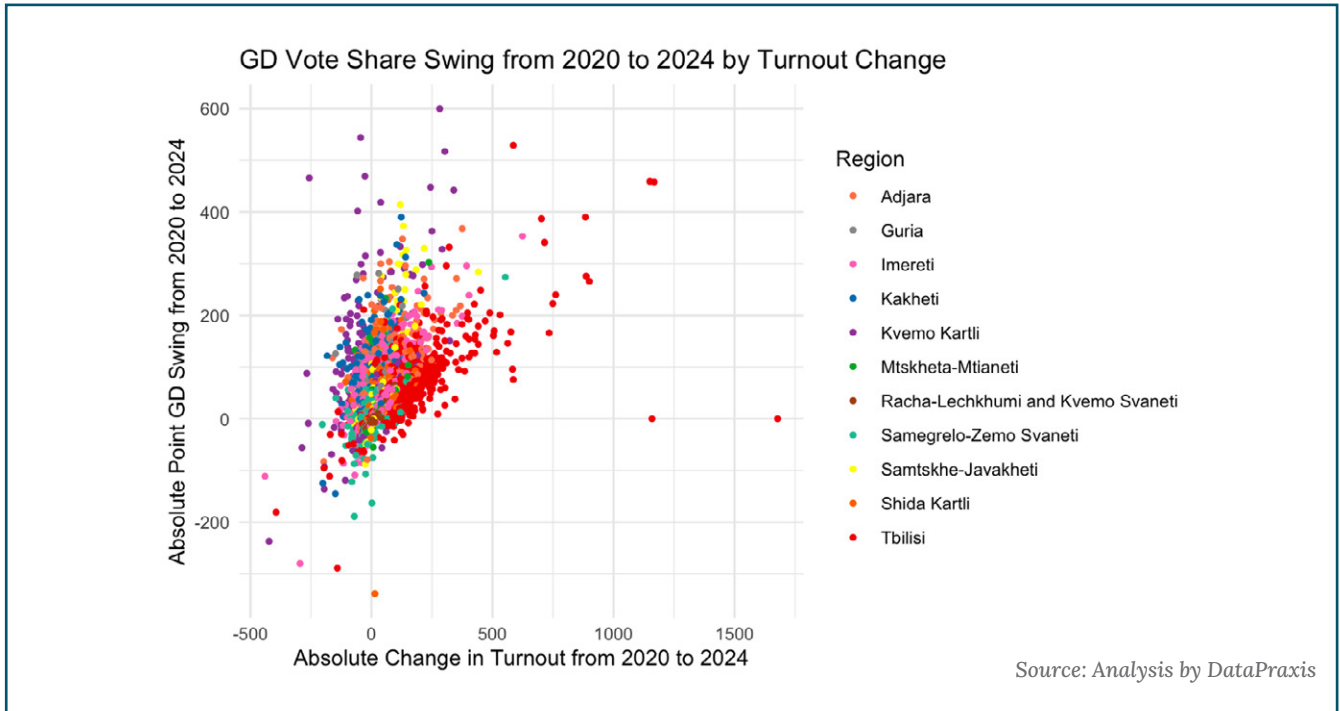
In some contexts, the unprecedented vote buying and mass intimidation brought many additional voters for the Georgian Dream. In others, voters massively shifted from opposition parties to the Georgian Dream. These overall trends are illustrated by the chart below.

The turnout story, however, is nuanced. In some regions, turnout decreased. In large parts of Kakheti, where the main coordinator of the Georgian Dream was a feared former security official,

turnout declined while support for the Georgian Dream went up, suggesting vote suppression against the opposition parties.

In other areas, turnout increased significantly, such as in Tbilisi, where support mainly was leaning to opposition parties, and in some more remote areas, where support was overwhelmingly for the Georgian Dream (See the map below).





The closer analysis thus shows diverse sharp edges at work that served to undercut the competitiveness of the election.

The graph given above illustrates that no single story shows how votes switch to the GD when turnout changes. There is an overall cluster at the top left, but other data points in a different direction. This again seems to confirm that elections were managed locally at the district level.

Fingerprints on a Rigged Election

Election forensics point to consistently suspicious election results. These statistical tests look for deviations from naturally occurring patterns in data. Such deviations are akin to fingerprints left at a crime scene.

The tests specifically reported on in this section include:

1. *Mean of second digit*: looks at whether the second digit in a number follows Benford’s law as applied to the second rather than the first digit. This tool is commonly used in tax account-

ing to detect fraud, as numbers that occur under normal circumstances tend to follow this pattern, while those that have been tampered with often do not.

2. *Skew*: a measure of how symmetrical the distribution of turnout is. If the distribution is not symmetrical, this can imply various types of illicit voting strategies - in fairly conducted elections, the distribution of turnout tends to approximate a bell curve (or normal distribution).
3. *Kurtosis*: a measure of how spiky or flat a distribution is. In the current context, if the number is significantly higher than expected, it suggests a suspiciously high level of high turnout precincts.
4. *Diptest*: test whether there is more than one peak in the distribution of turnout. If this test suggests this is the case, it can indicate that turnout was artificially high in a set of voting precincts.
5. *Zero-five percent mean (count)*: similar to the last digit mean test in its logic, however, it looks explicitly for excess zeros and fives which are particularly common for people to round to or for goals for party coordinators

to be set at (e.g., bring 100 voters or increase the vote share to 70%). This version of the test looks at the number of votes reported.

- 6. *Zero-five percent mean (percent)*: the same test as noted above; however, conducted with the percentages of votes for each party at the precinct level.

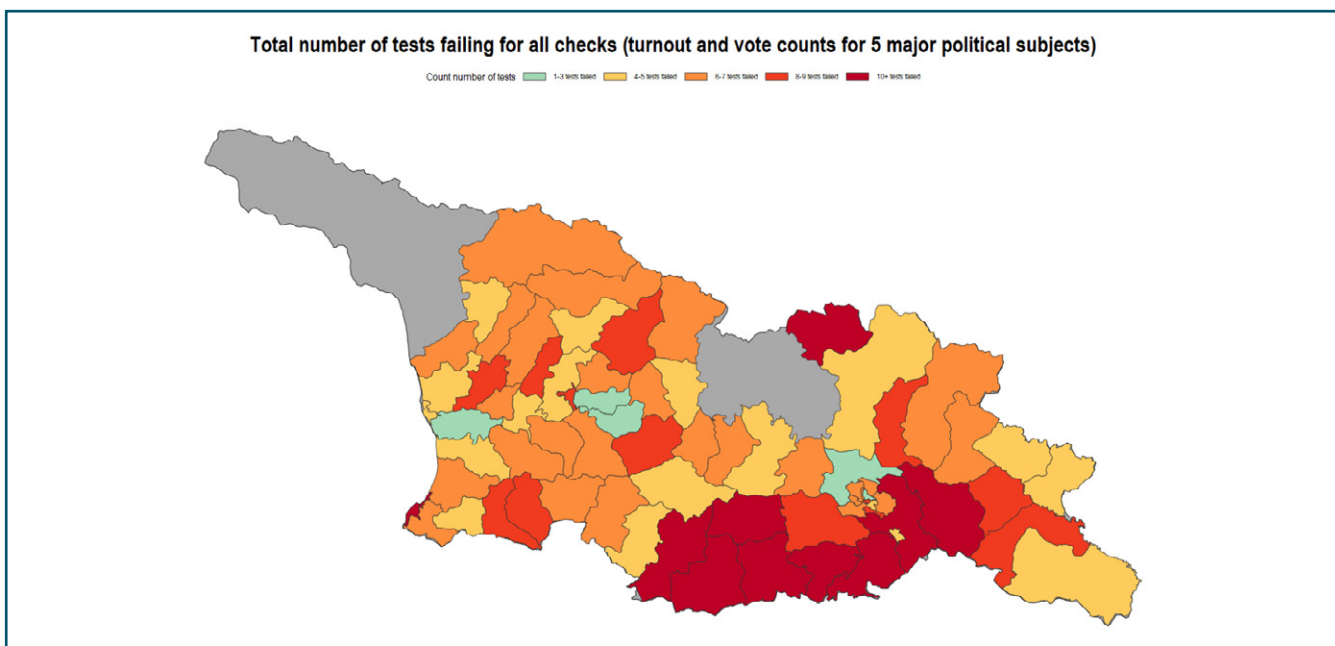
Three tests on turnout data (see the table below) show a pattern consistent with a rigged vote. The results for the Georgian Dream’s vote share show similar suspicious patterns. In total, six tests were conducted on voter turnout counts at the national level, vote counts for the Georgian Dream, and for each opposition party and/or candidate for elections since 2020 (leading to a total of 24 tests for the 2020 parliamentary elections and 24 tests for the 2024 parliamentary elections and showing that

while 2020 had its problems, 2024 was a lot worse). Tests on opposition votes suggest their vote share has consistently been illicitly pushed downward.

Tests at the district level for the 2024 parliamentary elections support the widely reported suspicions of geographically concentrated electoral manipulation. The map below shows the total number of statistical anomalies registered for turnout and party vote counts.

Electoral districts in the southern Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions show ten or more anomalous results as do Sagarejo, Stepantsminda, and Batumi. Dmanisi in the Kvemo Kartli region has the highest number of flags, indicating 15 deviations from normal statistical behavior.

Number of Election Fraud Tests with Suspicious Results by Election and Variable Tested (count)		
	2020 Parliamentary Elections (4 Opposition Parties)	2024 Parliamentary Elections (4 Opposition Parties)
Turnout	2	3
GD / Candidates	3	3
Opposition / Candidates	17	18



These techniques can also be used to analyze previous elections in Georgia and show some negative patterns during United National Movement (UNM) rule, highlighting that these are not just tools that work in one side's favor.

Sharp Impacts at the Precinct Level

The analysis above shows that the election was rigged. Further statistical exploration shows that violations on election day alone could have affected tens or hundreds of thousands of votes. This conclusion results from comparing similar locations where observers did and did not report issues using a statistical tool called *matching*.

Matching enables an estimate at the precinct level of the minimum impacts on the Georgian Dream and opposition vote counts from specific forms of electoral malfeasance such as violence and intimidation, violations of voter secrecy, and obstruction of voters on election day. To conduct this analysis, we used data from the CEC, Geostat - Georgia's National Statistics Agency, geospatial data, and WeVote observer reports of election violations to identify statistically indistinguishable locations that did and did not have observer reports of issues. With regression, we estimated the impact at the precinct level. Matching was conducted on precincts with any named violation in the WeVote category and then analysis of individual violation types was conducted to decompose the impact.

The analysis shows a remarkable picture. In precincts where observers reported physical violence and intimidation, the Georgian Dream gained an additional 30 votes while the main four opposition parties lost 41 votes. That is to say, violence worked: In precincts where it was employed, the Georgian Dream intimidated and, on average, beat 71 votes out of voters. Because observers were not in every location, it is not possible to determine

how large an effect fear had on election day overall.

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If intimidation and a credible threat of imminent violence occurred at 100 precincts, the Georgian Dream received 7,100 votes. If voters were actively terrified at 500 precincts, the ruling party received 35,500 extra votes. Importantly, this number should be considered a floor—intimidation in Georgia was widespread before election day and this number only accounts for fear on election day.

Observers also widely reported the breach of secrecy of the vote. In precincts where this was observed, the opposition lost an additional 53 votes due to this practice. If this practice was a problem at 24% of precincts, as reported by the ODIHR observers, the lack of secrecy gave the Georgian Dream an advantage of 39,538 votes. If this problem prevailed at more than 2,200 precincts with electronic vote counting devices, as widely reported, this number could approach 116,600 votes. As mentioned, the ODIHR observed difficulties feeding the ballot into the vote-counting devices in more than half of the polling stations.

In precincts with restricted observer rights, the Georgian Dream gained an additional 20 votes while the opposition lost 24 votes. If this occurred in approximately 10% of polling stations, it would translate to 13,640 votes; if it occurred in 30% of polling stations, it would translate to 40,920 votes.

In addition to these bleak findings, the analysis showed that the Georgian Dream gained votes from the following practices:

- Violations related to the mobile ballot box gave the Georgian Dream 50 votes per precinct;
- Falsification or improper correction of final protocol (a rare violation) led to the Georgian Dream having 329 votes more on average.

The main four opposition parties also lost votes in precincts that experienced the following violations:

- Campaigning at the polling station, a practice which borders on intimidation in many cases, is associated with 57 votes fewer per precinct for the main four opposition parties;
- Not checking voter ID or using safeguard methods is associated with 49 votes fewer per precinct;
- Unauthorized people at the polling station caused there to be 42 votes fewer for the four main opposition parties at each precinct this took place at, on average;
- Voting with improper documentation is associated with 32 votes fewer for the opposition per precinct where this was observed.

While based on solid statistical calculations, these results underestimate the impact of the various forms of electoral malpractice witnessed during election day. Observed vote buying was not present in the data, meaning that the impact of a widely reported violation could not be estimated. Other observers discovered vote buying in more than 10% of precincts, though the practice is illegal and, therefore, usually hidden.

Here, only statistically significant effects are presented; generally, most violations point towards advantages to the GD and disadvantages to the main four opposition parties. Had the non-sig-

nificant values been given, the size of the impacts would have been substantially larger.

Finally, this analysis can only explain practices on election day itself. Pre-election day intimidation and vote buying, among other practices, account for many of the Georgian Dream's votes and the opposition's lack of them.

Burden of Proof on Authorities

The evidence that these elections were rigged through a multi-pronged assault – a dozen daggers – is solid. Rather than investigate these concerns, the government has gone chiefly after people who have highlighted significant discrepancies.

The evidence that these elections were rigged through a multi-pronged assault – a dozen daggers – is solid. Rather than investigate these concerns, the government has gone chiefly after people who have highlighted significant discrepancies. Some people continue to demand “incontrovertible proof” that the election was rigged. That reverses the actual obligations.

When a government captures the court system, it also incurs the obligation to prove that other processes in the country are free, fair, and competitive because it has taken over the one institution in which these issues otherwise can be freely negotiated – and to which citizens can come forward without fear of retribution.

In this way, the Georgian government's response has only served to underline its overall authoritarian intent and practice ■

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

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.

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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cials 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

As in every special operation, the major opponents need to be neutralized, even before the start of the active phase. For the Georgian Dream, major population groups to be neutralized were Georgian migrants, who could not be subjected to pre-election pressure.

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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.

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.

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 ■

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.

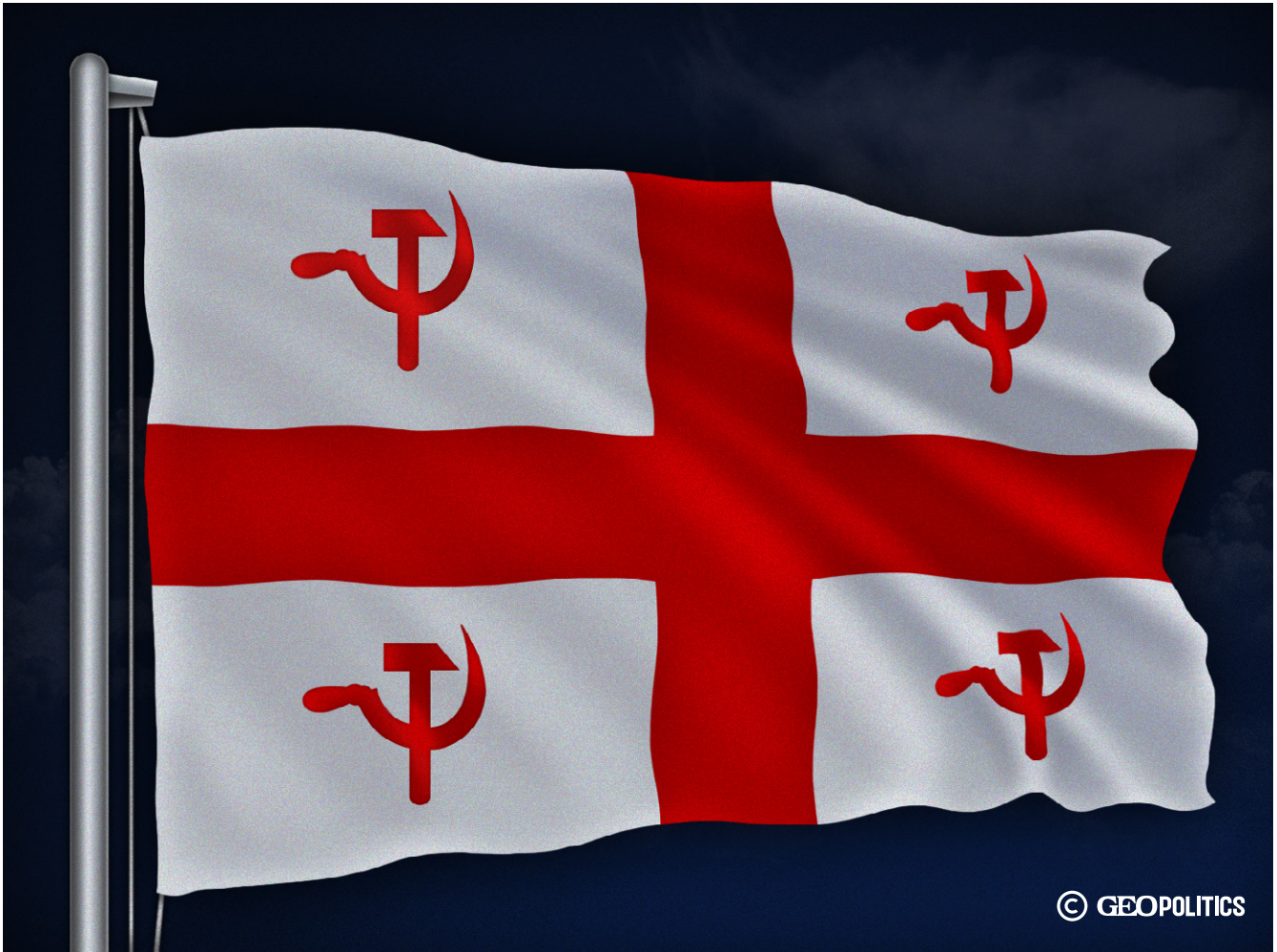
Considerable evidence shows that the election result did not reflect the will of the Georgian people.

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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Guest Contributor

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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.

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 significant risk of it.

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.

The election result should be seen in the context of regional geopolitical conflagrations. One of the reasons for the defeat of the European Georgia was that, concurrently, Russia was on the offensive in Ukraine. This implied that the West was retreating.

The election result should be seen in the context of regional geopolitical conflagrations. One of the reasons for the defeat of the European Georgia was that, concurrently, Russia was on the offensive in Ukraine. This implied that the West was retreating. From the very first days of the war, Ivanishvili put his stakes on Russia's victory; this proved suitable for him at this stage. Had the war gone in favor of Ukraine, Georgia's election might have had a different outcome.

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.

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 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.

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.

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 ■

Reconciliation That Isn't

Ivanishvili's "War Apology" is Vulgar Electioneering – And a Dangerous One at That

Historians like to remind us of moments in human history when political leaders have moved with an ambition to overcome centuries of enmity through their sheer will and bridge the rivers of spilled blood with a promise of hope. Think of Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling in Warsaw and also his Ostpolitik, remember the Good Friday Agreement, or the US President Richard Nixon's visit to China, recall the transforming spirit of the Schuman Agreement, or Yitzhak Rabin's doomed vision for peace in the (much) promised land, or the almost-reunification of Cyprus. These statesmen did not always succeed, but they marked the spirits even then.

Hearing the news about the "apology for war" coming from Tbilisi, an uninformed observer could be excused for believing that the founder and patron of the Georgian ruling party was trying to conjure a similar act of dramatic symbolism, especially as he was speaking on the campaign trail in the town

of Gori, ravaged by a 2008 military incursion by Russia.

Yet, such a perception would be wrong; for the case of transformative leadership, it wasn't.

Ivanishvili, speaking hesitantly and preening at the teleprompter, [said this](#) from behind a bullet-proof glass podium:

"Immediately after the 26 October elections, when those who instigated the war would face justice, when all those guilty of destroying the Georgian-Ossetian brotherhood and coexistence will receive their due, harshest legal verdict, we will find it in ourselves to apologize that acting upon orders, the treasonous National Movement put our Ossetian sisters and brothers up to the flames. And since forgiveness is one of the keystones of our - Georgian and Ossetian - shared Christian faith, I am confident that the fratricidal confrontation instigated by Georgia's enemies will end with mutual forgiveness and sincere reconciliation."



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Like treason wrapped in a conspiracy, inside a narrative – to paraphrase Churchill’s famous dictum – the man who, on most accounts, runs (and, some say, owns) Georgia was advancing a proposition of ultimate political revenge, rather than a vision of lasting peace.

Like treason wrapped in a conspiracy, inside a narrative – to paraphrase Churchill’s famous dictum – the man who, on most accounts, runs (and, some say, owns) Georgia was advancing a proposition of ultimate political revenge, rather than a vision of lasting peace.

This was not the first time: from its early days in 2012, the Georgian Dream has repeatedly campaigned on the promise of what it inelegantly called “ending” the United National Movement (UNM), its predecessor and nemesis. But what first seemed to be a promise to send the opponents into a political knockout became a personal threat. And what once seemed to be circumscribed to the small clique of publicly derided former officials today grew to encompass all of the opposition, something that the ruling party has made extremely clear.

“I promise you that the Georgian Nuremberg Trials [against the collective United National Movement] will be held very soon and will become one of the preconditions of reconciliation,” this was the opening passage of Ivanishvili’s Gori speech.

Maybe this was purely domestic politicking? A campaign bravado of a self-appointed oligarch-cum-savior? A disturbing, perhaps even deranged, narrative with no bearing on reality?

Yet, there is more to this statement than meets the superficial eye as it points to its author’s glaring, Russia-sized blind spot, the foreign and do-

mestic policy machinery that can no longer check the leader’s incompetence and the way his fundamentally flawed worldview affects, infects and, ultimately, substitutes the *raison d’état*. A lesson to observe, without a doubt, well beyond Georgia’s ramshackle frontiers.

There is more to this statement than meets the superficial eye as it points to its author’s glaring, Russia-sized blind spot, the foreign and domestic policy machinery that can no longer check the leader’s incompetence and the way his fundamentally flawed worldview affects, infects and, ultimately, substitutes the *raison d’état*.

Bear Me No Bears!

Curiously, Ivanishvili did not pronounce the word “Russia” a single time in the context of the 2008 war. This is despite the uncontested fact that Russian military crossed an international border, despite the war crimes charges [brought](#) against Tskhinvali officials and the Russian Major General by the International Criminal Court, despite the fact that the European Court of Human Rights threw out the war crimes claims against Georgia not [once](#), but [twice](#), and [ruled](#) that Russia was responsible for the breach of six articles of the European Convention of Human Rights as well as for failure to conduct an effective investigation into the alleged breach of the right to life in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008.

Ivanishvili did not pronounce the word “Russia” a single time in the context of the 2008 war.

The Georgian Dream bases its premise of the UNM’s responsibility for “sending the Ossetian

brothers and sisters up in flames” on the peculiar [interpretation](#) of the [report](#) by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, also known as the “Tagliavini Report,” named after Heidi Tagliavini - a Swiss diplomat who led the Mission. That interpretation is in line with what the Kremlin has been insisting on and what Tbilisi (including after the Georgian Dream came to power) has been resisting in the international arena.

The report said the “shelling” of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7-8 August “marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict.” It did, however, add that any explanation of the origins of the war “cannot focus solely on the artillery attack on Tskhinvali in the night of 7-8 August” but must take into account the waves of escalation that occurred before. Crucially, the Mission said that it is “not in a position to consider as sufficiently substantiated the Georgian claim concerning a large-scale Russian military incursion into South Ossetia before 8 August 2008” but added that “there seems to have been an influx of volunteers or mercenaries from the territory of the Russian Federation to South Ossetia through the Roki tunnel and over the Caucasus range in early August” and that Russia verifiably started to attack Georgian military targets before the time it officially announced as the time of the intervention.

Georgia officially [contested](#) some of these statements at the time of the report’s publication in 2009. And while Amb. Tagliavini recently [said](#) she stands by the findings, who in their right mind would minimize the “influx of volunteers and mercenaries” from Russia after the “little green men” took over Crimea in 2014 and after Moscow plunged Ukraine into war on two separate occasions?

Some authors, like Tom de Waal, have [argued](#) that “some Georgians have used the Ukraine crisis to

gild their version of history” and military analysts also purported that Tbilisi may have [miscalculated](#) the degree of Moscow’s willingness to engage militarily. Yet, there is no denying that the assessments of the Russian motives and intentions in the European capitals back in 2009 were a far cry from their current position. The European Union and the US were not going to pick a fight with the Kremlin over Georgia (witness the infamous “reset”) and the Tagliavini Report gave them a way to minimize that “incident.”

In truth, Ivanishvili considered the 2008 war to be the UNM’s fault from the outset. He said so in 2013 that the escalation that preceded the war was “not serious enough” and that it was “unjustifiable to start military actions before Russian [troops] crossed Georgian borders” – copying Moscow’s interpretation.

In truth, Ivanishvili considered the 2008 war to be the UNM’s fault from the outset. He [said](#) so in 2013 that the escalation that preceded the war was “not serious enough” and that it was “unjustifiable to start military actions before Russian [troops] crossed Georgian borders” – copying Moscow’s interpretation. But by now, not only has the Georgian Dream’s take on the August 2008 war been in line with Moscow’s original interpretation of the events, but it also sprouted new elements that favor the Kremlin’s current thinking - namely the idea that Mikheil Saakashvili’s administration started the conflict on “orders from abroad.”

In his [interview](#) with the Russian official outlet Izvestiya, Russia’s former spy chief, Nikolay Patrushev, said the US “organized” the 2008 war. A similar line [was taken](#) by the top Russian diplomat at the United Nations. Lastly, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov took the leaf from the Georgian Dream’s

talking points and [accused](#) the West of attempts to open the “second front” in Georgia.

In other words, not only does Ivanishvili’s “apology” have a Russia-sized hole in it but it also shares the worldview with the Kremlin – that of the malicious West conspiring to instigate war and instability for its egoistic regional interests and by plunging client regimes into war. Where does the “apology” fit in?

Can Conspiracies Cut Both Ways?

Ivanishvili’s worldview has become progressively more steeped in conspiracy theories. Central to his party’s election campaign was the narrative of a Global Party of War orchestrating schemes to undermine the Georgian Dream.

In this context, the “apology” thesis was meant to work in conjunction with a campaign [promise](#). The Georgian Dream said it sought a supermajority because “in the case of a peaceful restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity, constitutional amendments will be necessary in order to bring the Georgian system of government and territorial state arrangement in line with the new reality,” noting that “given the opposition’s anti-state attitude,” it will not support amending the constitution and become an “obstacle” on this path. In other words, the Georgian Dream said it may have needed to modify the constitution to achieve the goal of territorial integrity.

Let’s hypothetically consider what such changes might be. Two possibilities come to mind – modifying the elements of the constitution’s provision, which defines Georgia as a unitary state with broad autonomy for Abkhazia, or modifying the article on Euro-Atlantic integration. In other words, either making Georgia a confederation or abandoning its NATO (and/or EU) objective.

Since no further details have emerged, hints are

being dropped that Russia may “give Abkhazia and South Ossetia back” in exchange for certain concessions – something that is not grounded in any tangible diplomatic reality so far. Yet, with the Russian chokehold being [tightened](#) on Sokhumi, some in the opposition there [fear](#) that the authorities could be forced into unacceptable concessions.

Since Russia’s officials are [praising](#) Georgia’s “maturity” – like veteran Georgia negotiator Grigory Karasin – and saying the two occupied provinces may also need to “turn the page,” [like](#) Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova – the local strongmen in the two occupied provinces will get jittery and Ivanishvili can try to sell their nervousness as proof of the success of his peaceful policy.

One thing about conspiracies is that they are unverifiable.

One thing about conspiracies is that they are unverifiable. Another difference is that in contrast to real political visions, like the ones we referenced at the outset of this article, they often ignore the intricacies of the diplomatic process. Still, the negotiation process formally exists and continues as do the positions cautiously built over the years.

What’s On the Table?

The Geneva International Discussions (GID) is a format that brings together the EU, the OSCE, and the UN as mediators, Georgia and Russia, as well as *de facto* and *de jure* representatives from Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. It was launched as a follow-up to a contested and only partially fulfilled 2008 ceasefire agreement, concluded under the aegis of the French EU Presidency. The six-point “*Protocole d’Accord*,” signed on 12 August 2008 by French President Nicolas Sarkozy – acting in his capacity as the President of the European Council – with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, postulates an immediate ceasefire, the non-use of force, the

withdrawal of Russian and Georgian troops to *ex-ante* positions, and the opening of an international discussion on the modalities of security and stability in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The objectives of the GID mediation have been blurry. The 12 August 2008 protocol has tasked the GID to deal with the modalities of security and stability arrangements and with the ways to address the plight of refugees and displaced persons. But by the time the GID had gathered for its first meeting, the co-chairs had already internalized the impossibility of full implementation of the ceasefire agreement. The reason was Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states and the subsequent deployment of Russian military bases there "on the basis of bilateral agreements."

These "new realities," the Russian diplomats claim, have nullified the provisions of the 12 August 2008 agreement, including Russia's obligation to withdraw its forces. As a result, participants saw the objectives of the GID differently. Moreover, they disagreed fundamentally about their respective roles – Russia claims to be in a facilitator role while Georgia considers Russia its direct adversary, a party to the August 2008 war and the existing ethnic conflicts, and the power which is in effective control of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions.

Georgia views the GID as a process of mediation with Russia following the August 2008 war between the two countries. Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia consider the format as a part of the negotiations regarding the conflict between Georgia, on the one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the other, while the August 2008 crisis is portrayed as just one significant escalation in a general context of conflicts. In this sense, Russia continues to insist that Georgia concludes a binding non-use-of-force agreement with both provinces. Georgia's official position has been that such a signature would imply the recognition of the two

provinces as subjects of international law. Instead, Georgia sought a non-use-of-force agreement with Moscow.

The GID as a negotiation format has been moribund since Russia invaded Ukraine. The Kremlin has also been pushing for moving the talks to neutral grounds, suggesting Minsk.

Despite the inability of the GID to deliver, it has been the ground for staking out the official diplomatic positions of the sides.

Despite the inability of the GID to deliver, it has been the ground for staking out the official diplomatic positions of the sides. Perhaps surprisingly, the Georgian Dream did not succeed in substantively shifting Georgia's position which remains roughly along the same lines as it was after the end of 2008 hostilities. Former GD Minister charged with conflicts, Paata Zakareishvili, who has since parted ways with the ruling party, has argued in his [book](#) that while his party has intended to re-imagine these negotiations also as negotiations with Sokhumi and Tskhinvali as "sides to the conflict," he has failed. Zakareishvili names two reasons for this: the incompetence of his party colleagues and the high level of competence of the civil servants in foreign policy and security establishment at the mid-level. These "busy little bees," as he calls them, have prevented the new government from shifting the course.

This is a telling claim in the current context. Ivanishvili's personal position on the 2008 war and the conflict may have remained broadly unchanged since 2012 but since then, the checks on his personal whims within the GD (which used to be a coalition in 2012) have weakened considerably and the "busy little bees" in the civil service have been weaned out or left of their own accord due to disagreements with the overall foreign policy course.

A Georgian “apology” – in the way in which Ivanishvili seems to envisage it – would be a boon for Moscow. Ivanishvili may look at diplomats disdainfully but the Kremlin never forgets about the formal negotiating positions.

Yet, Georgia’s negotiating positions at the GID remain mostly intact. It is no surprise that Russia still insists on Tbilisi signing a binding legal agreement on the non-use of force – a single critical policy objective it still maintains in the GID. A Georgian “apology” – in the way in which Ivanishvili seems to envisage it – would be a boon for Moscow. Ivanishvili may look at diplomats disdainfully but the Kremlin never forgets about the formal negotiating positions. For Russia, the victory at the negotiating table – even in a peripheric format like the GID – represents a kernel of victory on a larger chessboard where it challenges and seeks to overturn the established world order.

Against the Grain

Ivanishvili’s talk of an apology is not about restoring justice nor would it contribute to peace. It is about eliminating the opposition and claiming absolute power based on an exceptional, non-institutional, and supreme knowledge of the workings of this world. Invoking such a possibility, believing in a conspiracy having an impact on reality is not only delusional but also dangerous in several real-life ways.

Firstly, it is fundamentally based on a conspiracy mentality which says bigger powers toy behind the scenes with the fates of the lesser actors who have no agency of their own. This worldview is fundamentally disadvantageous for Georgia. Secondly, it is essentially based on the belief in Russian victory – both in Ukraine and, more generally, in upending the influence of the Western powers internationally and, more narrowly, in the South Caucasus. Thirdly, based on that understanding, Ivanishvili’s “virtue signaling” implicitly places Georgia under Russia’s patronage – something consistently detrimental to Tbilisi’s security ambitions in recent decades. Fourthly, it takes away the agency from the Georgian people in favor of the omniscient benefactor – Ivanishvili himself – thus undermining democracy. Finally, any steps taken in that direction without an institutional backup and accompanying adjustment of the negotiating position means handing Russia a diplomatic and political victory at the expense of Georgia’s national interest.

The reason why Ivanishvili can even be making such an outlandish claim without public consultation or support is that he has managed to subdue the “little bees” of Georgia’s institutions and can govern unchallenged and unhinged. Given the official October parliamentary election results (provided that they stand), the dreams unhinged from reality may indeed become a living nightmare ■

FAQ and Misconceptions about Georgia

In recent years, Georgia has been subject to several misguided perceptions about its political and governing systems. As a small country located in a geopolitically challenging region, Georgia often struggles to capture the sustained attention of policymakers and opinion leaders. This lack of attention has led to widespread misconceptions and a superficial understanding of the country's problems, which have broader regional implications.

This article addresses some of the most frequently asked yet misguided questions about Georgia. These misconceptions distort the country's reality and contribute to formulating ineffective policies that fail to address the real issues and sometimes even reinforce them.

Misconceptions about Public Opinion and Elections

Let us start with one of the most widespread

questions: "If the vast majority of Georgians are pro-Western and pro-democracy, how has the Russia-friendly Georgian Dream (GD) party remained in power for over a decade, winning every election since 2012?" This question is even more relevant today after the official results of the 26 October parliamentary elections attributed almost 54% of the votes to the Georgian Dream.

The latest elections demonstrate how state machinery, party propaganda, and various voting fraud schemes distorted the choices of the Georgian people.

This question reflects a typical yet simplistic assumption that Georgia's political system allows for free and fully informed electoral choices, reflecting the public's overwhelming pro-Western stance. The latest elections demonstrate how state machinery, party propaganda, and various voting fraud schemes distorted the choices of the Georgian people. In fact, this whole volume is dedicat-



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ed to precisely such malpractices by the Georgian Dream.

But let us explore this issue in greater detail. Various [polls](#) show that 80% of Georgians support EU membership. At first glance, with such a solid European-minded population, the Russia-friendly Georgian Dream should not have maintained power for such a long time, already entering its fourth term.

What we must not overlook is that for years, the Georgian Dream has pursued a carefully crafted narrative publicly supporting European integration while implementing policies that aligned Georgia with Russia. This deceptive strategy masked the party's authoritarian tendencies for years, allowing it to maintain power despite the population's pro-Western leanings. In 2020, the GD campaigned with the promise to submit the EU membership application by 2024 and boasting its pro-European credentials, often referring to signing the Association Agreement and DCFTA with the EU, as well as visa liberalization with the EU as exclusively Georgian Dream's achievement.

It was not until Russia's war against Ukraine that the Georgian Dream's true agenda became evident as the party openly sided with Russia's rhetoric, exposing and enhancing its anti-democratic practices and importing Russian-type legislation, targeting NGOs and sexual minorities. There are two reasons why this transformation happened. First of all, Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Russia-enriched oligarch, seemed to believe that Ukraine's loss was inevitable and, therefore, sided with the potential winner - Putin's Russia. Secondly, as the prospect of EU membership became real, the EU requested reforms that jeopardized the GD's grip on power. Thus, the EU reforms were shelved to the benefit of total control of state institutions and undermining of the challengers of Ivanishvili's power - independent state institutions, opposition parties, free media, and civil society organizations.

The false paradox of simultaneous popular support for the EU and for the Georgian Dream has confused Western leaders and questioned whether or not Georgians are making an informed choice about the European path. This misconception helped [legitimize](#) the elections held under massive disinformation, voter intimidation, vote buying, and the misuse of administrative resources. Each election conducted under these conditions has been prolonging the regime's hold, enabling further erosion of democratic institutions and entrenching Ivanishvili's authoritarian rule.

Many irregularities, including a massive breach of vote secrecy, carousels, voting en masse with other people's ID cards, and other electoral violations, affected the outcome, granting 54% to the declared winner - the Georgian Dream.

The 2024 October parliamentary elections showed how the popular will can differ from the election outcomes. Many irregularities, including a massive breach of vote secrecy, carousels, voting en masse with other people's ID cards, and other electoral violations, affected the outcome, granting 54% to the declared winner - the Georgian Dream. The details of the fraud are described explicitly throughout this volume.

The misconception about Georgia's political system often leads to another misguided question: "If the Georgian Dream has been winning elections in Georgia for the last 12 years, does this not mean that they represent the Georgian people as a democratically elected government?"

The problem is that this question assumes that the electoral victories alone attest to the Georgian Dream representing the people's will. However, this representation does not happen in a genuinely democratic process. While the Georgian Dream has consistently won elections, these results must

be understood in the context of systemic issues that compromise the fairness of the political and electoral process. Over the past decade, elections in Georgia have been marked by widespread disinformation campaigns, voter intimidation, misuse of state resources, and media control, all of which skew the playing field in favor of the ruling party. Furthermore, the 2016 and 2020 elections were heavily distorted in favor of the incumbent because of the majoritarian component of the elections. In 2016, the Georgian Dream's 48% support translated into a constitutional majority, while in 2020, similar support gave them an overwhelming majority because of the 30 “bonus” majoritarian MPs. It is not surprising that the Georgian Dream dragged its feet to transition to a fully proportional electoral system.

The repeated victories of the Georgian Dream are not purely a reflection of popular support but rather the result of a heavily manipulated system in which opposition parties face significant barriers. We have discussed this in detail in the previous [edition](#) of *GEOpolitics*. The ruling party's grip on institutions—such as the judiciary and the media—creates an environment where genuine political competition is stifled, and the electorate's ability to make free and informed choices is severely limited.

Misconceptions about Domestic Politics and the Opposition

Georgia's friends often ask, “Is there a real alternative to the Georgian Dream? The opposition seems weak and fragmented, lacking a strong leader. Do people even trust the opposition parties?”

The main misconception here is that the opposition's fragmentation and the lack of a single charismatic leader make them an unviable alternative to the Georgian Dream. In fact, unlike many European countries or other countries in the region,

the Georgian political system evolved from a bipartisan (the United National Movement [UNM] and the Georgian Dream) to a multi-party system. The elections of 2024 have shown that four opposition parties, representing and appealing to various segments of the population, have garnered almost 40% of the votes (if we consider the official results), and most likely even more, considering the scale of [fraud](#) and irregularities.

One of the reasons why the “fragmentation” of the opposition spectrum happened is that the Georgian Dream has strategically chosen to demonize its primary foe – the UNM and President Mikheil Saakashvili, resorting to arrests, political persecutions, and physical assaults throughout the last 12 years.

One of the reasons why the “fragmentation” of the opposition spectrum happened is that the Georgian Dream has strategically chosen to demonize its primary foe – the UNM and President Mikheil Saakashvili, resorting to arrests, political persecutions, and physical assaults throughout the last 12 years. Fragmentation of the UNM due to these attacks was unavoidable as many of its offshoot political centers attempted to reinvent themselves by distancing themselves from the UNM, trying to increase the opposition voter base. The breaking off of European Georgia (now back with the UNM) and Strategy the Builder (also back with the UNM) led to the diversification of the electoral base for the opposition parties in 2016 and 2020. In the first round of the 2018 presidential elections, two prominent opposition party candidates (the UNM and European Georgia) received almost 50% of the votes. However, these breakups of the largest opposition party were insufficient to appeal to a vast majority of voters who voted against the UNM in 2012.

Since 2020, however, the opposition base has genuinely diversified, and for the first time, in the 2024 elections, Georgian voters were offered a choice of four political centers. If one did not like the parties that originated from the UNM (like the Coalition for Change, based around new parties – Ahali, Droa, and Girchi-More Freedom), then they could opt for Lelo (a mixture of businessmen and liberal politicians) or the GD's former prime minister Giorgi Gakharia's party – For Georgia. Unsurprisingly, the GD has been trying to [dub](#) all political opponents as the “collective UNM” and scare away the disenchanted GD voters or undecided voters from supporting the opposition. However, the opposition is stronger today than ever, and the electorate is offered diverse political choices despite the pressure, intimidation, and coercion from the ruling regime.

What further contributes to the relative weakness of the opposition parties is a consistent lack of financial resources. The state funding of the political parties is limited and makes it impossible to campaign in a normal, unhampered way.

What further contributes to the relative weakness of the opposition parties is a consistent lack of financial resources. The state funding of the political parties is limited and makes it impossible to campaign in a normal, unhampered way. The consolidation of power under one party leads to a scarcity of resources available for the opposition, making it difficult for them to establish coherent party structures. Additionally, the private sector is often hesitant (or scared) to fund or support opposition parties, weakening their ability to build motivated leadership and professional activism. As a result, politics rarely becomes a primary profession or source of income for politicians, significantly impacting their commitment and dedication. The disproportion in resources is best visible during

the elections when the ruling party outspends all opposition parties taken together and also beats it in mobilizing supporters, outdoor ads, social media spending, or TV advertisements.

Yes, the opposition parties still have access to independent media outlets, one feature of Georgia that still makes it different from full-fledged authoritarian states like Belarus or Russia. The critical media's affiliation with the opposition parties ensures that their voices are heard. However, the state propaganda machinery, through the GD-affiliated Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, and PosTV, is much more powerful and resourceful. Moreover, the opposition-minded TV stations are constantly under attack and underfunded; their viability depends on the cash inflow from the founders, ads from the continually decreasing ads market, or the sheer enthusiasm of the management and journalists, whose safety is constantly in danger.

Finally, many Western friends who are used to seeing a united opposition in their countries often apply the same logic to Georgia. But the reality is that in Georgia, there is no single opposition, no single opposition leader, and no ideological coherence among various parties challenging the government. And this is highly likely to remain for the years to come. In fact, even referring to the opposition in a singular term is misleading. The more correct expression would be – opposition parties.

The Myth of Polarization

Georgia's friends are often worried about a deep polarization in Georgia which is viewed as an internal issue that needs to be resolved. “Western partners cannot help you here” – is a primary concern. Naïve interlocutors also inquire what the government and opposition are doing to reduce the polarization and what could Georgia's partners do to resolve this.

This concern is based on the misconception that

political polarization in Georgia is solely an internal matter without recognizing that the ruling party, the Georgian Dream, actively contributes to and benefits from this division. While the government and the opposition indeed bear responsibility for not fostering a more cohesive political environment, polarization has become a strategic tool for the Georgian Dream to maintain power. Therefore, it will never do anything to depolarize.

The ruling party labels anyone critical of its policies as part of the “collective National Movement,” demonizing the opposition and portraying them as enemies of the state and the people.

The ruling party labels anyone critical of its policies as part of the “collective National Movement,” demonizing the opposition and portraying them as enemies of the state and the people. Recently, the “agents of the foreign powers,” “stateless politicians,” and “war lovers” have been more often used labels. Just before the election, the rhetoric of the Georgian Dream leaders shifted from demonization to the promise of arrests and banning of the opposition parties. In a typical whataboutist fashion, the Georgian Dream leaders refer to the example of Moldova and Ukraine, arguing that the EU candidate states have banned the opposition parties before and received no reprimand from the EU.

Such demonization has consistently undermined normal political processes and closed any space for dialogue or debates in the parliament or the media. Moreover, the government restricts the opposition’s access to pro-government media outlets, including the public broadcaster, allowing it to participate only in controlled media and institutional environments that the GD dominates while avoiding appearances on independent TV channels. As a result, the media landscape is divided, with government-controlled channels attacking

the opposition and independent outlets criticizing the government. These echo chambers, sterilized from the real debate on political content, have now become so entrenched that it would take an inhuman effort to dismantle them as long as the one-party rule in Georgia stays in place.

As this volume’s guest contributor Hans Gutbrod famously [called](#) it, Georgia has no polarization but “vicious refeudalization“. Gutbrod argued that polarization falsely suggested equivalence between opposing political forces and was a misleading concept because of systematic power consolidation by the Georgian Dream, ongoing surveillance and intimidation, control of media and judiciary, violence, and jailing of political opponents.

After every national election in Georgia, in which the government consolidates power further and attacks opponents, Western friends step in with the narrative of reversing polarization. Notably, the European Union’s intervention in the post-2020 election crisis was centered around depolarization and the political agreement masterminded by Charles Michel was all about reducing internal political tensions. The fact that the agreement did not work should have been a good lesson for the EU; however, in 2022, it reimposed the condition of depolarization as part of the reforms to be undertaken for the progress of European integration.

Depending on how the ongoing post-election political crisis in Georgia unfolds, leaders in the West will definitely attempt to reintroduce “depolarization” yet again as a task for the Georgian political elite. Doing so would be a dramatic mistake. Any talk of depolarization, while Ivanishvili promises to shut down the opposition parties, prosecute “collective UNM,” and destroy NGOs, is music to the ears of the Georgian Dream leaders.

Equating a bully with the victim and calling on both to refrain from violence is not the best strategy to prevent the bully from further abuse. Giving

a correct diagnosis to the Georgian political context will considerably influence how successful Western policies are vis-à-vis the authoritarian Georgian government post-2024 elections.

Misconceptions about the Judiciary

Georgia's friends often have stereotypical visions of Georgia's judiciary system. For years, we have seen puzzled Western decision-makers wondering why there was no trust in the judiciary system and why should the local judicial remedies not be used fully, taking into consideration that Georgia implemented several waves of the EU and US-supported judicial reforms and adopted many legal instruments aimed at increasing judicial independence.

This misconception assumes that adopting European-style institutional reforms and establishing formal judicial structures guarantees true judicial independence and impartiality. While Georgia has indeed implemented several waves of reforms, a powerful judicial elite (known as the Clan) has colluded with the ruling party and made the courts fully subordinate to the Georgian Dream.

Despite adopting the European model for the High Council of Justice, which (on the paper) equips judges with self-governance powers, autonomy, and independence from the executive and legislative branches or political interests, the actual situation is dramatically different. The Clan, a group of influential judges connected with the ruling party, consolidated influence within the judiciary, making it virtually impossible for the regime's opponents to seek justice. In this, Georgia is like the former communist states of the CEE, where hierarchically organized career judiciaries with the legacy of "telephone justice" were given broad self-government powers through judicial councils only to empower judicial elites at the expense of judicial independence.

The true extent of this control became evident during the controversial Supreme Court appointments in 2019, when major Western powers, including the EU, [condemned](#) the process as severely flawed and akin to "packing" the court with loyalists. Civil society efforts to document the Clan's influence have revealed the troubling depth of judicial clientelism, which threatens the judiciary's independence from within.

As a result, millions of euros and dollars allocated by international partners for reforms were misused. Rather than fostering independence, these resources allowed a group of empowered individuals to consolidate their influence in the judiciary, further entrenching control for the regime's benefit and undermining reform efforts. Among such loyalists is the current [head](#) of the Supreme Court – Ivanishvili's personal lawyer in his previous life and the senior judges [sanctioned](#) by the US for corruption charges. The Appeals Court and the Constitutional Court are also stacked with party loyalists. The Constitutional Court has consistently ruled along party lines, with a recent high-profile case being the impeachment of the President. At the city court level, some select independent judges can go against the system at the expense of their safety and reputation. One of the recent examples was a decision of the Tetrtskaro city court, which [annulled](#) 30 precincts in Tetrtskaro and Tsalka because of the infringement of voter confidentiality. However, the prompt appeal of the Central Election Commission to the Appeals Court, prompt grouping of the cases and their allocation to the judges with dubious reputations, and the swift [overturning](#) of the first instance court's decision are the most recent examples of the total government control of the judiciary.

This misconception of a relatively independent judiciary has been fueled by the significant reduction in petty corruption in the court system, where everyday cases rarely involve bribery, unlike in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Howev-

er, when the political or economic interests of the ruling elite are at stake, any judicial decision can be influenced. This erodes the fundamental principles of democracy and undermines the balance of power, allowing Ivanishvili and his proxies to consolidate control.

Moreover, this dynamic creates a culture of impunity for regime loyalists, weakening accountability. As a result, state-building efforts in all sectors are hampered. Civil society, the private sector, and political pluralism cannot thrive, stifling political life and preventing change through fair, democratic processes. Consequently, there is no confidence in the judiciary. Civil society actors, while appealing to unjust laws and going through the whole cycle of seeking justice in the country, increasingly feel that they are wasting time and resources.

Misconceptions about Foreign Policy

The most prominent misguided question about Georgia's foreign policy is whether or not the European Union or NATO should continue the advancement of Georgia's integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures while risking provoking Russia into another military "special operation."

The core misconception here is that accepting Georgia into the EU or NATO would automatically provoke a war with Russia. However, the reality is more nuanced. As Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine has demonstrated, what provokes Russia is not bold and principled decisions but perceived weakness and opportunities to exploit vulnerabilities.

The core misconception here is that accepting Georgia into the EU or NATO would automatically provoke a war with Russia. However, the reality is more nuanced. As Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine has [demonstrated](#), what provokes Russia is not bold and principled decisions but perceived weakness and opportunities to exploit vulnerabilities. Russia acts when it sees a chance to further its objectives, not when faced with unified and determined opposition from the EU and NATO. As further [demonstrated](#) by the quick accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO enlargement facilitates stability and deters Russia from further destabilizing regions, not the other way around.

This misconception's grave and far-reaching consequence is the unnecessary protraction of Georgia's NATO integration process and ample opportunities for Russia to [meddle](#) with democratic processes. Delaying Georgia's accession based on fears of provoking Russia only plays into Moscow's hands. On the one hand, it empowers Russia with the tool to exert influence over European and Euro-Atlantic structures by stalling enlargement through destabilization. On the other hand, this delay fuels frustration, fatigue, and depression inside Georgia and other countries of the region. As clearly evidenced by the massive interference in the [Moldovan](#) and [Georgian](#) elections in 2024, the protracted integration processes create exploitable vulnerabilities, often causing the weakening of democracy.

This is why the issues of restoring Georgia's territorial integrity and its integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures should have been explicitly decoupled long ago. While integration into NATO or the EU does not mean the occupation of Georgia's lands by Russia will be resolved immediately, it would undoubtedly strengthen Georgia's sovereignty and democratic resilience. A comprehensive strategy is required to address territorial

disputes without holding back Georgia's progress toward EU and NATO membership. A clear focus on [coherently](#) enhancing security and stability rather than giving Russia further leverage by delaying integration is even more critical in the aftermath of controversial elections.

While pro-Russian forces in Georgia are trying to alter election results and tighten the regime's grip on power, it is of utmost importance to empower pro-democracy forces and reassure Western-minded public by highlighting an unambiguous alternative to Russian control. The European and Euro-Atlantic integration process should not be a reward for perfect governance but a pathway that helps countries strengthen their institutions, democracy, and the rule of law. A clear and decisive path toward integration, supported by international partnerships, would weaken Russia's ability to use occupation as a tool of influence and will prevent further destabilization in the region.

What Needs to Change?

While there are many other misguided questions surrounding Georgia and its politics, there is one that can help sum up the fundamental difficulties Georgia has been facing on its path toward building a democratic, prosperous, and secure country: if the Georgian people overwhelmingly support democracy and are united in their desire for a European future, why has the government not been able to consolidate and overcome its internal deficiencies?

The misconception here is not that the question is wrong but that it fails to grasp the multifaceted, interconnected problems Georgia faces fully—problems often exploited and aggravated by Russia's massive hybrid warfare strategy.

While the Georgian people are pro-democracy and united in their European aspirations, the country's

ability to consolidate and overcome internal deficiencies requires resources, skills, and experience often lacking within the country. A significant challenge lies in the lack of continuity and coherent long-term planning which should be guided by a unified national identity and shared national interests. However, the ruling elites have instead fueled polarization and divisions as a means to retain power, hindering national cohesion.

The legacy of seven decades of Soviet occupation has also left deep scars, making it difficult for Georgian society to form a consensus on national values and interests. Soviet-era quasi-identities, imposed through indoctrination, still clash with traditional values, creating vulnerabilities that modern Russian propaganda successfully exploits. Russia's hybrid warfare strategy builds on these historical weaknesses, deepening societal divisions.

Georgia's lack of experience in democratic governance, particularly in building solid checks and balances and decentralizing power, has hindered the development of effective self-governance. The political system has become overly centralized, preventing the emergence of diverse leaders from local and regional levels.

Moreover, Georgia's lack of experience in democratic governance, particularly in building solid checks and balances and decentralizing power, has hindered the development of effective self-governance. The political system has become overly centralized, preventing the emergence of diverse leaders from local and regional levels.

The weak educational system further complicates this issue. Teachers, one of the most vulnerable and underpaid groups, cannot foster criti-

cal thinking or impart strong democratic values. While younger generations educated abroad have made strides, systemic educational reforms are still needed to equip future generations with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate these complex challenges.

In summary, there are no quick fixes to Georgia's internal and external problems. However, a cor-

rect understanding of the country's problems, its governance system, and deficiencies can be a good ally for the Western partners to craft policies and responses to the crises and Russia's influence operations in Georgia and the wider region. Rose-colored glasses must be removed if the collective West is to become a serious alternative to Russia's hybrid warfare in Georgia ■

Post-Election Geopolitical Alignments of Georgia and Moldova

The outcomes of the recent elections in Moldova and Georgia underscore that both sustaining and shifting foreign policy agendas often demand unconventional strategies. In Moldova, the incumbent pro-Western President Maia Sandu secured a narrow victory in the second round on 3 November, largely thanks to the diaspora, thereby preserving the country's current foreign policy direction.

Conversely, in Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party achieved a highly contentious victory on 26 October, allegedly through human interference in electronic voting processes and other questionable methods. In response to these allegations, the EU and the US [suggested](#) an international investigation, which Tbilisi dismissed as foreign meddling. Consequently, Georgia's future remains uncertain, a scenario Russia and other autocratic regimes could exploit. These elections in two EU candidate countries have resulted in what can be described as “opposite continuities.”

Maia Sandu's re-election is significant as she defeated her rival, former prosecutor Alexandr Stoianoglo, who was labeled Russia's “Trojan horse.”

Maia Sandu's re-election is significant as she defeated her rival, former prosecutor Alexandr Stoianoglo, who was labeled Russia's “trojan horse.” Sandu's victory reinforces the EU's strong confidence in Moldova's progress, particularly in light of Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine. In contrast, the continuity in Georgia carries negative implications. With the oligarchic regime likely to stay in power, Georgia's foreign policy could further deteriorate in its relations with the West, especially the EU. Although the Georgian Dream claims to pursue EU membership, its actions—such as labeling civil society organizations as “foreign agents” and fostering rising intolerance toward the LGBTQ community—will make it increasingly difficult to promote this narrative internationally.



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Elections Without Geopolitical Surprises

The elections in Moldova and Georgia did not trigger major geopolitical shifts. In Moldova, President Maia Sandu was re-elected after two rounds of voting. While she [secured](#) 55.35% of the total vote (around 930,139 votes), her Socialists-backed opponent, Alexandr Stoianoglo, won 51.34% (694,422 votes) within Moldova, compared to Sandu's 48.6% in the country. Sandu gained about 30,000 more votes in the runoff than in the first round, totaling 660,226 votes domestically. The diaspora played a crucial role in her second-round victory, with nearly 272,000 votes cast for her, an increase from the 243,605 diaspora votes she [received](#) in 2020. However, this strong diaspora support comes at the cost of her perceived legitimacy at home, where Stoianoglo outpaced her by about 30,000 votes. Even considering potential influences from the Shor group and voters in the Transnistrian region, the results were tight, reflecting significant geopolitical polarization. This internal division was further fueled by Moldova's alignment with EU sanctions against Russia, [adhering](#) to about 80% of the measures following Russia's aggression.

While Moldova managed to walk on the tight-rope more or less successfully, the same cannot be said about Georgia. The outcome of Georgia's parliamentary elections, deciding the fate of future government, was largely predictable, given the entrenched power of the oligarchic regime since 2012. In the months leading up to the general elections, the opposition rallied in mass anti-government protests against the controversial "foreign agents' law." Despite the absence of a unified opposition movement, 17 opposition groups coordinated their efforts by [signing](#) the "Georgian Charter," spearheaded by Georgia's President Salome Zourabichvili. This platform helped to align their strategies, bolstered by the President's vocal opposition against the government. Her leader-

ship also fostered greater unity among opposition forces, reducing the usual personality-driven competition.

However, these efforts were insufficient to overcome the ruling party's election preparation. The Georgian Dream successfully conducted the "war vs. peace" campaign, which appeared to beat the "EU vs. Russia" campaign driven by the opposition groups. The Georgian Dream leveraged administrative resources, personal data, and "ID rental" tactics to secure a favorable election outcome. While winning the capital and foreign vote, unlike Moldova, Georgian opposition parties were outmaneuvered, outvoted, and outrigged in the smaller towns and rural areas. Ultimately, only four other political parties crossed the 5% threshold, with the Georgian Dream claiming a disputed [54% vote](#), compared to 38% for the four pro-EU opposition groups. The ruling party ignored warnings from the [European Parliament](#) and other EU institutions about the deterioration of democracy, [risking](#) Georgia's EU candidate status and potential accession talks; it managed to secure a total grip over the state institutions and, eventually, the election outcome. The election results have deepened political polarization in Georgia, likely further exacerbated by ongoing protests and the pro-EU opposition's boycott of the elected legislature.

The European Side of the Coin

EU political support and promised financial aid enabled Maia Sandu to regain voter backing.

The EU and Russia have influenced the electoral dynamics in Moldova and Georgia, albeit in fundamentally different ways. In Moldova, EU political support and promised financial aid enabled Maia Sandu to regain voter backing. Despite the country's geopolitical polarization, with EU support ranging from 50% to 60%, a clear majority within

Moldova and the diaspora consistently vote for a pro-EU president, opposing any candidate perceived as aligned with Russian interests. Sandu's opponent, despite advocating for a "balanced foreign policy," could not escape voter suspicions of harboring a hidden pro-Russian agenda.

The EU's support for Sandu was underscored by the visit of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to Chisinau where she announced a financial package of EUR [1.8 billion](#) over three years. Though controversial under Moldova's national electoral laws prohibiting meetings with foreign actors during the campaign, this move was seen by the EU as a necessary step. The EU perceived no viable alternatives, given Moldova's political situation is deeply connected to broader security challenges in Ukraine where Russian aggression shows no signs of abating.

Although Georgia enjoys strong EU support, with over 80% of the population favoring EU integration, the ruling party continues to serve the personal interests of the politician-turned-oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, often at the expense of national interests. Political polarization and a fragmented opposition mobilized the pro-EU voters to challenge the oligarchic regime which increasingly clashed with the EU's enlargement policies and is susceptible to Russia's hybrid interference strategies. The EU was banking on a shift in public opinion toward the four opposition forces that gained parliamentary seats, viewing them as key allies in advancing its reform agenda.

Brussels is sympathetic to Georgian opposition parties, seeing them as vital partners for addressing critical issues such as justice, elections, and human rights. This approach also supports the ongoing efforts of civil society organizations, which have come under pressure from the recently [passed](#) "law on transparency of foreign influence" (or "foreign agents law"). The EU's conditionality for unfreezing Georgia's candidate status reflects

the opposition's grievances and raises expectations among both the EU and the Georgian public for a pro-EU agenda led by the opposition figures. Over the past decade, however, the EU's influence has been insufficient to prevent Ivanishvili from solidifying his informal control over the state institutions.

Overt and Covert Russian Meddling

Russian interference in the Moldovan elections has taken a distinct approach compared to its actions in Georgia. Since the first round of presidential elections on 20 October, alongside a referendum on embedding European integration into the Constitution, Russia has actively sought to disrupt the process. It has done so through pro-Russian proxies like the political group led by Ilan Shor, who was convicted in absentia for his role in the 2010–2014 bank fraud that drained 15% of Moldova's GDP. Exploiting the fact that nearly a third of Moldovans live in absolute poverty, Shor's Victory Bloc used special payments to virtual accounts targeting vulnerable populations to draw in voters.

Moldovan authorities reported that USD 39 million was transferred through the Western-sanctioned Promsviazybank to 138,000 individuals, many of whom likely voted NO in the referendum.

In September and October, Moldovan authorities reported that USD 39 million was [transferred](#) through the Western-sanctioned Promsviazybank to 138,000 individuals, many of whom likely voted NO in the referendum. The referendum narrowly passed with 50.4% of the vote, representing just 25% of the total electorate. In the second round of the presidential election,

Russia escalated its tactics by orchestrating the transport of Moldovans living in Russia to vote abroad, with flights reported to Istanbul, Minsk, and Baku. Inside Moldova, polling stations for Transnistrian residents saw heavy traffic. Additionally, cyberattacks on voter registration systems, bomb threats at polling stations in the UK and Germany, and widespread disinformation highlighted the extensive use of malign foreign interference to undermine the election and its results.

In Georgia, Russian interference took a subtler approach, primarily reinforcing the Eurosceptic messaging of the ruling Georgian Dream party. This fueled opposition claims that the government was “pro-Russian.” The Georgian government’s discussions about “rebuilding bridges” with Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia) opened the door for Russia to offer its mediation services. Additionally, Tbilisi’s “apology diplomacy” concerning the 2008 Russian military invasion under Mikhail Saakashvili’s government further solidified perceptions of the ruling party’s pivot toward Moscow. This narrative allowed Russia to portray Georgia as returning to its sphere of influence, with the contested victory of the Georgian Dream seen as confirmation. Russia further embraced and supported the Georgian Dream’s narrative of a necessity to confront Western encroachment on Georgia’s sovereignty and protect Georgia’s Christian values from immoral European influence.

One clear instance of covert Russian interference was the Hungarian leaders’ quick legitimization of the Georgian election results, particularly [Viktor Orbán](#). His post-election visit to Tbilisi seemed like a calculated move to prevent public unrest over allegations of electoral fraud. This underscores how Russia leverages its allies, such as Hungary, to influence EU candidate states indirectly. While a visit from a Russian official would have likely sparked mass protests

and radicalization, Orbán’s presence was less inflammatory and strategically beneficial for the Georgian government. Despite EU statements clarifying that Hungary’s endorsement did not reflect Brussels’ stance, Orbán’s validation helped secure a muted reaction from nearly half of the EU, which refrained from signing up to the joint letter from 13 EU Member State ministers criticizing the election outcome.

Additionally, Azerbaijan and Türkiye’s rapid acknowledgment of the election results highlighted the geopolitical prioritization of “stability” over “democratic diligence,” especially given Georgia’s critical role as a transit route for Caspian energy supplies to Europe. Georgia’s minority populated regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti (Armenian minority) and Kvemo Kartli (Azerbaijani minority) were more susceptible to Russian propaganda and Georgian Dream’s intimidation campaign. It is, therefore, no surprise that these regions voted heavily in favor of the Georgian Dream, like Gagauzia and Transnistria in Moldova. Domestically, the Georgian-speaking population was already exposed to anti-EU narratives propagated by the ruling party, its affiliated media, and political allies. Rather than introducing new propaganda, Russia amplified existing Georgian domestic narratives to further its “informational war” against the EU.

What Next?

Moldova has successfully avoided a scenario in which a candidate portrayed as pro-Russian replaces a pro-Western president and embraces a more ambiguous stance toward Russia. However, the country still faces significant challenges related to geopolitical polarization. Re-elected President Maia Sandu must now work to unify a divided public by promoting a reconciliation agenda that reduces vulnerabilities Russia could exploit in the 2025 parliamentary elections. If Sandu prioritizes

political loyalty over competence in her government, she risks missing a critical opportunity to bolster her legitimacy and restore confidence in Moldova's pro-EU trajectory which was shaken by the controversial referendum results. Her approach to implementing reforms should be carefully balanced to avoid the kind of backlash that led to the rise of Ivanishvili in Georgia following Saakashvili's heavy-handed governance.

Georgia's path forward is fraught with more uncertainty. The country faces the threat of deepening

its political crisis if ongoing protests fail to yield concrete outcomes, such as the peaceful calling of new elections. The EU's delayed and hesitant response to the disputed election results, particularly after Hungary's endorsement of the Georgian Dream, has left Georgia vulnerable. This hesitancy allows Russia greater freedom to exploit Georgia's internal instability. If the EU and the West fail to provide consistent support, Georgia's democratic institutions will likely erode further under the strain of an oligarchic regime consolidating power ■

Europe's Need for an Urgent Paradigm Shift to Keep Georgia and Moldova from Russia's Influence

There was a time when political life in Georgia and Moldova was dominated by the personalities of two oligarchs: Bidzina Ivanishvili and Vlad Plahotniuk. At a Paris conference dedicated to a comparative analysis of the two cases with my Moldovan colleague, I joked, borrowing an Odessite funny story, when a cheated woman, while seeing the mistress of her husband's friend, exclaims: "But ours is better!" I remember saying then to my friend that "our" oligarch was "better." His wealth was greater, his capture of the Georgian state was more complete and comprehensive, and his links to Russia were more ancient and solid.

Today, Plahotniuk is no longer around. A succession of other oligarchs (Ilan Shor, Vyacheslav Platon) who have taken up the pro-Russian torch in Moldova were defeated by pro-European forces in the referendum and successive presidential elec-

tions. It was challenging, but nonetheless, there was defeat. By contrast, Ivanishvili is still firmly entrenched in Georgia and has just successfully organized a large-scale electoral fraud, mobilizing all the structures of the state machinery to this end.

Georgia, which has had no diplomatic relations with Russia since 2008, has an explicitly pro-Russian government receiving encouragement and applause from Moscow officials and Kremlin propagandists.

This notwithstanding, many paradoxes are in place. From its independence and before the Georgian Dream's (GD) ascend to power, Georgia has always been aligned with the West, including expressing a will to become a NATO member. On



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the other hand, Moldova has seen a constant alternation of pro-Russian and pro-Western forces and has never claimed a NATO membership objective. Opinion polls show that over 80% of Georgians want their country to join the EU, while Moldovans are less enthusiastic about the union. This is despite Moldova's foreign trade being much more closely [linked](#) to the EU than Georgia's. In addition, Georgia, which has had no diplomatic relations with Russia since 2008, has an explicitly pro-Russian government receiving encouragement and applause from Moscow officials and Kremlin propagandists. Moldova's Maia Sandu, meanwhile, has become the *bête noire* of the Russian media and the Kremlin. However, Moldova still has diplomatic ties with Moscow and even held elections in Russia for Moldovan expats.

Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine are frontline countries. Moscow seeks to achieve the same objective in all three states: with "hybrid" methods in the first two cases and kinetic and bloody warfare in the last. Pressure on Chisinau and Tbilisi has increased significantly since the start of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine and the return of the enlargement issue to the European agenda. At this stage, the Kremlin has taken a setback in Moldova but is holding firm in Georgia.

State Capture as a Decisive Variable

In addition to many similarities, such as their similar Soviet past, their status as EU candidate countries, comparable demographics, the existence of separatist conflicts fomented by Moscow as early as the 1990s, and *de facto* territorial entities occupied by the Russian army, Moldova and Georgia also have some notable differences.

The key and decisive difference is that, in Georgia, the state apparatus has been taken over by a pro-Russian political force, the Georgian Dream

party, whereas Moldova managed to escape state capture. Moldova's path to recovery began with Maia Sandu's victory in the 2020 presidential election and the pro-European PAS party's win in 2021. This alone was not enough, as the country has since faced intense pressure from Russia, including energy sabotage, cyber-attacks, multi-million-dollar funding of anti-European forces, fake news, and propaganda. Nevertheless, state control (except in Gagauzia and certain districts) remained largely beyond Russia's reach, making Moscow's objectives more difficult to achieve. In contrast, the Georgian Dream's hold over Georgia since October 2012 and the steady consolidation of power within state institutions greatly facilitated its success in the 2024 elections.

After Moldova's first round of presidential elections and referendum, Sandu accused "criminal groups working with foreign forces" of attempting to buy 300,000 votes.

Russia attempted an overt hostile takeover in Moldova, visible even at the surface level. Gaining power from the outside tends to be more blatant than maintaining it from within, as institutional control allows for more subtlety, as seen in Georgia. In October 2023, Maia Sandu [exposed](#) a plot by Russia's Wagner paramilitary group to overthrow her. Moldovan police uncovered a network of over a hundred young men trained in Russia, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina's Republika Srpska to incite post-election unrest. Such aggressive tactics were not needed in Georgia. After Moldova's first round of presidential elections and referendum, Sandu accused "criminal groups working with foreign forces" of [attempting to buy](#) 300,000 votes. In some regions, Russian payment cards were widely distributed to the population.

But what about Georgia? Why are international observers not emphasizing the "Russian meddling"

there, even though President Salome Zourabichvili has [described](#) it as a “Russian special operation?”

Is Russia Outsourcing to GD?

Georgia has not been any more resilient than Moldova against propaganda portraying Europe and the West as destabilizing forces labeled as “the Global War Party,” pushing moral degradation, destroying traditional and family values, and forcefully imposing same-sex marriage.

Despite Chisinau’s ban on Russian TV broadcasts, Russia maintains a robust network of Russian-language media outlets in Moldova that promote narratives favoring Kremlin interests. Russian-language media is much less prevalent in Georgia, with Russian TV broadcasts taken off the air in 2008 after the Russian invasion. However, Georgia has not been any more resilient than Moldova against propaganda portraying Europe and the West as destabilizing forces labeled as “the Global War Party,” pushing moral degradation, destroying traditional and family values, and forcefully imposing same-sex marriage.

Unlike in Moldova, in Georgia, this disinformation was primarily spread by Georgian-language media outlets linked to the ruling party. Channels like Imedi, Rustavi2, PosTV, and the Georgian Public Broadcaster disseminated Russian-aligned propaganda in Georgian without overtly referencing Russia. This approach proved more effective than if it had been presented in Russian. The same pattern extends to social media manipulation on platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Telegram. In May 2023, Meta [removed](#) dozens of Georgian government accounts, pages, and groups for “coordinated inauthentic behavior,” a term essentially referring to spreading fake news. Notably,

these accounts were linked to the government’s Stratcom, which had received significant European and American taxpayer funding.

Every statement from Moscow in support of the Georgian Dream only deepened mistrust among a substantial part of the electorate, making such endorsements undesirable. The only acceptable context for referencing the “big northern neighbor” was in discussions of “peace.”

Russia remained noticeably absent from Georgian Dream’s messaging, likely due to a tactical decision to avoid mentioning the country by name. Instead, pro-government propaganda concentrated on criticizing Europe rather than glorifying Putin’s regime. Any overt reference to Russia would have complicated matters for the Georgian Dream, as the Kremlin is widely unpopular among Georgian voters. Every statement from Moscow in support of the Georgian Dream only deepened mistrust among a substantial part of the electorate, making such endorsements undesirable. The only acceptable context for referencing the “big northern neighbor” was in discussions of “peace.” Given that Russia evokes both negative feelings and fear in a Georgian population still traumatized by the conflicts of the early 1990s and 2008, the Georgian Dream positioned itself as the sole guarantor of peace with Moscow.

The Georgian Dream’s control over the bureaucratic apparatus gave it a significant advantage over pro-Russian forces in Moldova. By fully controlling the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and having influence over the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), the Georgian Dream restricted the Georgian diaspora’s voting rights, systematically refusing to open sufficient polling stations abroad despite petitions from citizens outside Georgia.

In both Georgia and Moldova, the diaspora vote overwhelmingly supported pro-European forces (over 80%). Roughly 700,000 to 800,000 Moldovan and Georgian citizens abroad are eligible to vote. Yet, the Moldovan CEC opened 231 polling stations abroad, while the Georgian CEC only opened 67. This disparity explains Moldova's much higher diaspora turnout: 328,000 Moldovans (19.5% of total voters) voted compared to just 34,000 Georgians (1.6%). Diaspora votes were critical in Moldova, contributing to Sandu's presidential run-off victory and the referendum's pro-European "yes" vote. Joint sabotage by the Georgian Foreign Ministry and the CEC played a vital role in the GD's record score in these elections. It had a double effect: it reduced the number of votes for the opposition and increased that of the ruling party. Indeed, numerous reports submitted by NGOs and opposition observers point to the GD's [massive use](#) of the identity cards/identification numbers of emigrants not registered with Georgian consulates in their countries of residence and unable to return to the country on polling day.

State capture provided the Georgian Dream with invaluable tools to skew the fairness of elections. Every ministry and state agency was mobilized to deliver personal data on nearly every Georgian voter, giving the ruling party exclusive access to its advantage.

For instance, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs supplied lists of social aid recipients, participants in state medication programs, public health insurance applicants, substitution treatment program enrollees, and cancer patients. With this confidential information, the Georgian Dream tailored its campaign to individual needs, effectively commodifying votes. Voters were offered services precisely aligned with their needs, such as assistance with medication purchases, childcare, or Methadone distribution for individuals in addiction treatment programs. Penitentiary administration and the Ministry of Justice could provide

the complete list of probationers, the list of people serving their sentences in penal institutions, the nature of their offenses, and the length of their sentences. As the sole repository of this information, the GD was able to offer families amnesties and reduced sentences in exchange for votes. The people concerned, their families, and relatives were encouraged to cast their ballots for GD and become GD "coordinators" and electoral activists. The "special relationship" that law enforcement structures have with the criminal world was also put to good use to help the GD win: the neighborhood "petty thugs" could intimidate opposition voters in exchange for impunity for their crimes, drug deals, and daily incivilities.

The Ministry of Justice, along with Public Service Houses—once a hallmark of the previous government—and the border police, compiled a list of Georgian citizens abroad who had not registered with consulates, preventing them from voting on-site. The Georgian Dream exploited this pool of votes by organizing repeated voting through party loyalists or paid participants. According to some involved, the most "efficient" individuals voted up to 22 times at various polling stations nationwide.

Moreover, the judiciary, fully submissive to political influence, routinely dismisses electoral violation complaints from NGOs or opposition parties, with only a few courageous judges standing out. Yet even these cases face a dead end in higher courts, leaving opposition complaints with [no chance of success](#).

Numerous examples showcase, how the school and kindergarten teachers, often unqualified and failing state exams, were pressured into aiding falsification efforts in polling station commissions. Some neglected to apply invisible ink to prevent double voting, while others overlooked mismatched identity documents. Additionally, the Georgian Dream created tens of thousands of fictitious public service jobs in the lead-up to elec-

tions, presenting them as acts of charity—a classic example of [“using administrative resources.”](#)

The pro-Russian GD’s control of Georgia’s state apparatus spared Moscow the need for direct interference, which would have been more overt than in Moldova. This indirect approach was even more effective since apparent Russian meddling might have alarmed Georgian voters.

What Lessons for Europe?

The Georgian Dream has transformed Georgia’s elections and much of its political landscape into a kind of vast marketplace—the primary chance for the country’s impoverished, intimidated, and marginalized population to receive any form of aid from the state. Elections have ceased to be a moment of choosing a political, ideological, economic, or geopolitical direction; instead, they have become opportunities to distribute goods in cash, food, medicine, debt relief, and other essentials.

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The ruling party’s non-material messaging is minimal and largely negative, centered around fears it has previously cultivated: fear of war (with campaign posters [showing](#) destroyed Ukrainian cities contrasted with peaceful Georgian ones) and fear of the erosion of traditional family and gender roles (Bidzina Ivanishvili ominously referenced the “threat” of [male milk](#) replacing female milk in his last pre-election interview).

So, how should Europe and the West respond? European interest in the 2024 Moldovan and Georgian elections was high, particularly given the

context: these were the first elections since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the granting of EU candidate status to both countries.

Yet Europe’s interest, resources, and efforts still lag behind Moscow’s intense drive to intervene. There remains a constant threat that Russia is more invested in the EU’s eastern neighborhood—including candidate countries—than Brussels itself. European leaders like Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borrell have expressed strong support for the European aspirations of Moldova and Georgia, speaking of a historic chance for these countries to join the [next wave](#) of EU enlargement by 2030 if they maintain their reform momentum. These are indeed historic declarations driven by the geopolitical shifts brought on by the war in Ukraine. Just a few years ago, Kyiv, Chisinau, and Tbilisi could only dream of such opportunities. But Russia, even while bogged down in Ukraine, sees this as the time to advance its vision of a soon-to-be-restored empire.

Russia spares no effort in deploying subversion, hybrid warfare, disinformation, and constructing a distorted reality. Europe, meanwhile, has begun to respond but often remains one step behind. As democracies rooted in legality and transparency, EU responses are typically defensive, aimed at countering Russian tactics with moderate success but seldom through proactive measures.

Europe’s approach to Russia’s coercive diplomacy, blackmail, intimidation, destabilization, and corruption tends to rely on a positive agenda (reform assistance, financial aid, credits for infrastructure, and health and education programs). When Ursula von der Leyen visited Chisinau two weeks before the election, she announced a EUR 1.8 billion [“growth plan”](#) to support Moldova’s economy. This was an unprecedented commitment but likely had little immediate impact on the referendum outcome, as it seemed abstract to many impoverished Moldovans grappling with a crisis, especially



compared to the tangible EUR 100–150 in cash offered by Russian-backed sources. The same aspect played a role in the choice of thousands of Georgians who were more attracted by tangible money distributed by the GD coordinators than the prospect of a distant bright future as citizens of prospective EU member states.

Additionally, the EU has traditionally been reluctant to “influence the vote” in other countries, even where it has strategic interests. This is beginning to shift. Although the European Commission withheld the release of a country report on enlargement days before the vote—fearing it might appear as election interference—the EU ambassador in Tbilisi eventually moved beyond his original stance of “not babysitting Georgia.” He [cautioned](#) about the repercussions if elections were rigged or if laws contradicting EU principles, such as the “foreign agents” and “LGBT propaganda” laws, were not rescinded. Yet, this had little impact on

the Georgian Dream’s campaign, which stoked fears of imminent war to sway voters.

Need for Radical Changes

The EU must recognize that it is up against a predator intent on exploiting any sign of vulnerability. If Europe wishes to protect its values and influence, it must act as a force to be reckoned with, not a defenseless character in a familiar fable.

The EU needs to take a stronger stance. Often seen as a “herbivore” in a world of ruthless predators, Europe must adapt if it is to have an impact in a region where Georgia lives next to one of the most aggressive neighbors: Putin’s Russia. To make a difference, Europe must be ready to show its teeth. Europe cannot afford to play the role of Little Red

Riding Hood, wandering naively through the forest while the wolf—Russia—waits to pounce. The EU must recognize that it is up against a predator intent on exploiting any sign of vulnerability. If Europe wishes to protect its values and influence, it must act as a force to be reckoned with, not a defenseless character in a familiar fable.

Europe strives to be more geopolitical, aiming to establish a strategy in its eastern neighborhood. After years of inertia, it has embraced enlargement as a tool to extend its influence. This recalls EU policy in the 1990s, but today's challenges resemble the post-WWII era, marked by Soviet expansion. The aim is not to draw a direct comparison to the 1930s but rather to find a time when a positive outcome was achieved despite adversity.

In the years after WWII, the Soviet Union expanded its control across Europe, toppling democratic governments in countries like Czechoslovakia and Poland, installing satellite regimes in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, and influencing neutral Austria and Finland. Communist forces gained power in Yugoslavia and Albania, waged a civil war in Greece, and approached near-majority support in France and Italy, with significant backing from Moscow.

How was Western Europe spared from Soviet dominance? Bold action and collaboration with the US were key, primarily through the Marshall Plan. The plan was not just economic but a broad countermeasure involving culture, education, media, and heavy security involvement. NATO was born then, with the CIA supporting anti-Soviet forces. Intellectuals, or “influencers” of the era, were mobilized to resist.

Today, the US may be less inclined to intervene so heavily in European affairs, especially after Trump's return to the White House. Europe will now need to shoulder more responsibility. Europe in 2024 is prosperous, stable, and more capable of self-organization than after the WW II, while Russia lacks the reach of the USSR and has more modest ambitions. Former Warsaw Pact nations are now NATO members, contributing to Western defense. Putin's focus is Ukraine, not Germany. Europe can act with political will, a fresh perspective, and a significant shift in industrial, security, strategic, and cultural policies. Recognizing Georgia's disputed elections as illegitimate could be a solid first step ■

May the Force Be With EU

When Ian Manners [introduced](#) the concept of “Normative Power Europe” in 2002, he described the European Union as an actor that derives its influence from values rather than military or economic might. Unlike traditional powers, for two decades, the EU was viewed as an actor that could shape the international order through norms related to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These values form the core of the EU’s identity, codified in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, and are promoted globally, primarily through its enlargement policy. As seen in past decades, this policy has encouraged political and economic reforms in aspiring member states. Yet, as Georgia’s experience demonstrates, projecting this normative influence is not without challenges, particularly when geopolitical realities complicate the EU’s aspirations.

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, aiming to occupy the entire country. In response, the Ukrainian government applied for EU membership just four days later, rekindling the EU enlargement policy and open-

ing the door for Georgia and Moldova, which bandwagoned Ukraine on the way to the EU. This marked a turning point, as the EU enlargement policy—once considered one of the world’s most successful democratic state-building projects—had been largely dormant for years.

EU enlargement has promoted the rule of law and human rights in aspiring nations, but it has also served as a tool for achieving the EU’s geopolitical aims.

Historically, EU enlargement has promoted the rule of law and human rights in aspiring nations, but it has also served as a tool for achieving the EU’s geopolitical aims. Observing EU–Georgia relations over the past two years reveals the shifting EU approach toward Georgia and the underlying tension between the EU’s role as a normative power and a geopolitical player.

Geopolitics vs. Norms

The EU’s response to Ukraine’s application revitalized its enlargement policy, opening a path for



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Georgia and Moldova. This was a pivotal geopolitical moment as the EU moved to accelerate the enlargement process in response to Russia's aggression. Yet normative standards remained in place; thus, the EU attached conditions to all three applicants, aiming to leverage the newly opened EU pathway to motivate these governments to fast-track democratic reforms.

Initially, it seemed plausible to balance geopolitics with normative principles: Ukraine and Moldova achieved candidate status and pursued reforms. Georgia, however, due to its government's pro-Russian leanings, was offered only a "European perspective." The EU outlined 12 conditions Georgia needed to meet for candidacy, reflecting the EU's attempt to uphold its commitment to democracy, freedom, and the rule of law within a broader geopolitical strategy.

But the EU's normative approach hit a roadblock

as the Georgian Dream (GD) government showed little willingness to address the 12 conditions. Despite enacting three minor reforms, the GD resisted significant changes—such as depolarization, de-oligarchization, and judicial reform—that might undermine its power. In response to this backslide, the EU opted again for a geopolitical approach in December 2023, granting Georgia candidate status to prevent a widening gap with Ukraine and Moldova despite Georgia's limited progress on EU conditions.

This move was intended to assure the Georgian people of the EU's commitment and encourage resistance to the GD's anti-European agenda. However, it also suggested to the GD that the EU might accept superficial reforms, signaling tolerance for the government's reluctance to implement meaningful change.

This decision emboldened the Georgian Dream, im-

plying that as long as the EU prioritized geopolitical strategy over democratic standards, they could continue bending human rights and democratic norms. GD leaders frequently reminded the EU of its strategic interests in the region, almost in a form of blackmail: if the EU was focused on countering Russia, why would it care about democracy in Georgia? After all, the EU appeared lenient on democratic lapses in countries like Azerbaijan and Serbia. Receiving candidate status allowed the GD to portray itself as pro-European, misleading the public to believe this status reflected support for its “balanced foreign policy” rather than genuine alignment with the EU.

If the EU was focused on countering Russia, why would it care about democracy in Georgia? After all, the EU appeared lenient on democratic lapses in countries like Azerbaijan and Serbia. Receiving candidate status allowed the GD to portray itself as pro-European, misleading the public to believe this status reflected support for its “balanced foreign policy” rather than genuine alignment with the EU.

In October, the GD orchestrated the most flawed election in Georgia’s recent history, “winning” against the backdrop of a campaign that pitted the opposition’s vision of a European future against the ruling party’s warnings of an inevitable war with Russia. This “victory” unfolded as political ties with the EU soured and hit the lowest in history. In the spring, the EU effectively paused Georgia’s accession, with the European Council [stating](#) that the government’s actions “de facto halt the accession process.” EU-Georgia relations are at rock bottom currently and the EU has never faced such a stark choice between its normative and geopolitical priorities as it does now with Georgia.

The EU must now confront the reality that tolerating democratic erosion in Georgia could irreparably damage its credibility and values, reducing its leverage in the region. This is no longer just about balancing strategy with values; it is about whether or not the EU stands firm on its principles or allows them to be compromised in the name of geopolitical expediency.

EU’s New, But Familiar Dilemma

The EU’s engagement with Georgia has included persistent efforts to promote EU norms and enforce accountability. Leading up to the October 2024 elections, the EU consistently warned that the Georgian Dream’s trajectory threatened the country’s EU aspirations. Through various resolutions, high-level statements, and funding restrictions, the EU emphasized that adherence to democratic principles was essential for candidacy. Yet, this pressure proved ineffective; the Georgian Dream maintained its anti-European rhetoric, neglected necessary reforms, and failed to conduct fair elections despite EU appeals.

Now, the EU confronts a familiar dilemma: should it adopt a pragmatic geopolitical stance or uphold its identity as a normative power?

Now, the EU faces a familiar dilemma: should it adopt a pragmatic geopolitical stance or uphold its identity as a normative power? This tension boils down to whether the EU should effectively legitimize the Georgian Dream or continue to deny recognition to governments that seize power against popular will.

The Georgian Dream is counting on two main factors. First, it aims to withstand opposition pressure and protests, solidifying the legitimacy of the recent parliamentary elections by early December. By doing so, it hopes to present the EU with a *fait*

accompli, banking on Europe's shift from principles to pragmatism. The Georgian Dream bets that the EU will "get realistic," accept its limited leverage over power dynamics in Georgia, and seek a workable relationship with Ivanishvili. If Europe resists, the GD warns of Georgia's potential drift toward Russian influence—a veiled threat that has worked in the past.

The second factor upon which the GD relies is Donald Trump. After Trump's return to the US presidency, the GD intends to leverage its relationship with Viktor Orbán to reestablish ties with the new US administration. Their calculation is that if Washington resumes regular relations with the GD, Europe will likely follow, given its history of aligning with US foreign policy on key international issues.

The Georgian Dream has a well-established record of pressuring the EU into concessions. A tactic they have often employed involves arresting opposition leaders only to trade their freedom for concessions. The detentions and eventual releases of [Gigi Ugulava](#) and [Nika Melia](#) in 2019 and 2021 (the so-called 8 March and 19 April agreements), with EU mediation at both the ambassadorial and Council President levels, resolved political crises and led to renewed EU cooperation. With street protests in Georgia set to intensify, another round of "Freedom for Freeriding" seems likely.

But the current scenario may signal a more ambitious strategy. Ivanishvili's primary objective has always been to stay in power. Laws on LGBT propaganda and foreign agents are likely just bargaining chips he would gladly abandon in exchange for foreign legitimacy to secure another four-year term. With limited leverage from the EU, GD leaders hope that member states and EU institutions will ultimately accept the GD's hold on power, so long as the more extreme, Russian-style laws are rescinded. If, as part of this arrangement, soon-to-be-detained political figures and activists are

released, the GD assumes all sides would claim victory—except, perhaps, the EU's credibility as a steadfast defender of democratic norms.

May the Force Be With EU

Unlike the United States, the EU lacks effective tools to counter countries drifting toward authoritarianism, where leaders resist democratic reforms out of fear of losing power. This absence of practical mechanisms places the EU in a difficult position as it fluctuates from geopolitics to upholding its normative power. Balancing these interests is challenging as the EU risks either undermining its security priorities or compromising its core values. In the wake of the 2024 election crisis, Georgia has become a test of the EU's credibility and its capacity to align its geopolitical aims with its commitment to democratic principles.

In essence, the EU now faces a choice: it can either tacitly accept Georgia's transformation into a Serbia or Belarus of the Caucasus, continuing business as usual with a government that retained power through electoral fraud, or it can adhere to its principles by suspending or significantly downgrading its relations with Ivanishvili and his circle.

The EU has several options at its disposal; let us consider a few.

Before the October 2024 elections, the EU had repeatedly [floated](#) the idea of suspending Georgia's visa-free regime. This action could have weakened the Georgian Dream (GD) party's position ahead of the elections, potentially swaying intimidated or "bought" voters away from supporting the government. However, with the elections now in the past, imposing visa restrictions on Georgian citizens would serve little purpose.

There are four main reasons for this. First, removing visa-free travel would primarily hurt Georgian citizens rather than the Georgian government.

While it may “punish” those who voted for Ivanishvili under pressure, fear, or financial influence, it would not change the situation at this stage. Second, the GD would likely seize upon this move to fuel propaganda that the EU and the West disregard the Georgian people and only want to draw Georgia into a conflict with Russia. Third, if repression against the media, the opposition, and civil society intensifies, many Georgian democracy advocates may be forced to leave the country. Visa-free travel provides them with a crucial lifeline. Lastly, suspending visa-free travel only makes sense at a pivotal moment when dissatisfied citizens are likely to channel their frustration into anti-government votes. With elections now behind us, the next relevant opportunity for this would not arise until the local elections in fall 2025.

Removing visa-free travel is indeed the simplest action the EU can take as it requires no full consensus: the Commission and a simple majority of member states can override any potential veto from Hungary. However, taking the easiest route without considering its consequences would be short-sighted and likely counterproductive for the EU.

Another tool available to the EU is financial sanctions. Unlike the visa-free decision, however, financial sanctions require unanimous agreement. This makes it unlikely that the EU could bypass a veto from Orbán on sanctions targeting Georgia’s oligarch and his allies. Instead, individual EU member states could impose unilateral sanctions on those responsible for election fraud, crackdowns on citizens, and human rights violations. If the Baltic and Western European countries lead this effort, it could result in targeted sanctions against Georgia’s autocratic leadership, signaling that the EU is serious about upholding democracy, fair elections, and support for civil society.

The EU’s next option is financial assistance. It has already [withheld](#) additional funds within the

ENPI framework from Georgia while supporting Ukraine and Moldova. The EU could further clarify at the Commission level that no funds will go directly to the Georgian government, ensuring that only initiatives directly benefiting citizens and civil society organizations are funded. Unfortunately, this approach has not yet been implemented. In fact, at a recent European Parliament hearing, Enlargement Commissioner-designate Marta Kos [indicated](#) that the EU would be open to providing further financial assistance to both the Georgian government and civil society which risks encouraging the Georgian Dream. This is a misstep that may send the wrong message and embolden the ruling party. Kos also stated that repealing the Russian-style laws could pave the way for EU accession talks with Georgia. If this is not just a slip-of-the-tongue comment but a genuine policy stance, Ivanishvili is likely having a good laugh.

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Under ordinary circumstances, the EU’s most powerful lever would be the prospect of opening accession negotiations with Georgia if fundamental reforms were met. Yet this seems unrealistic now. Any suggestion that accession talks could be unfrozen would not only validate the “stolen elections” but would also invite further authoritarian moves from the Georgian Dream.

The EU also holds symbolic and political tools in its arsenal. Declining high-level meetings with Georgian dignitaries, refraining from inviting Georgian leadership to EU events, or suspending Association Council and Committee meetings are steps that could reinforce the EU’s normative power and signal discontent with the government’s trajectory.

Above all, the EU must clarify its objectives: will it wield its tools to uphold democratic standards, or will it revert to geopolitical calculations with Georgia? The EU faces a clear choice: if it values its normative strength, it cannot proceed with business as usual with a government that disregards democracy. If, however, it chooses to appease the GD government in the hope of reversing undemocratic measures, it must weigh the consequences carefully.

And those consequences are significant. Such concessions would weaken Georgia's pro-democracy movement and alienate the hundreds of thousands of pro-European Georgians who look to the EU as a beacon of democratic values. It would risk shattering the opposition's morale and dismantling the remaining strongholds of democratic resistance— independent media, NGOs, and opposition parties—which Ivanishvili has vowed to quash. With a green (or even yellow) light from the EU, he would complete this crackdown swiftly.

The EU risks a classic geopolitical miscalculation: in exchange for another round of superficial reforms—perhaps the reversal of the Foreign Agents'

Law or the Law on Traditional Values—Ivanishvili would gladly deepen his authoritarian control and stay in power for four more years. The opposition has already been demonized and the state captured, even without these legislative tools.

The EU risks a classic geopolitical miscalculation: in exchange for another round of superficial reforms—perhaps the reversal of the Foreign Agents' Law or the Law on Traditional Values—Ivanishvili would gladly deepen his authoritarian control and stay in power for four more years.

If the EU again places geopolitics above its normative commitments, it will not only entrench the Georgian Dream's grip on power but also cripple the democratic opposition and civil society. Now is the moment for the EU to demonstrate that it stands firm on values, not to reveal itself as a partner willing to bargain out of weakness. The stakes are high and the EU cannot afford to falter ■

License to Steal

At the beginning of the 19th century, Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously declared that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” Looking at electoral processes around the world, it seems that purely political processes—elections—are morphing into warfare, mainly as an essential tool in so-called “hybrid warfare.”

Advancing technologies penetrate all aspects of our lives, including politics and elections. Data aggregation, programmatic marketing, social media campaigns, and electronic voting systems have become essential to modern elections. At the same time, more “traditional” methods of physical ballots, election monitoring, voter marking, etc., continue to live alongside technological advances. While supporters of free and fair elections are heavily focused on technologies to avoid a “human factor,” election riggers are becoming increasingly innovative in finding loopholes and exploiting them, relying on well-known fraudulent methods on pre- and post-electoral days and election day. Usage of administrative resources, voter intimidat-

tion, ballot stuffing, and other traditional tools are still around and widely used.

Incumbent political forces always have an advantage, especially in places with weaker democracies and questionable checks and balances. On top of that, we can see a relatively new phenomenon of election interference by external players, especially countries, willing to tilt results in favor of their interest, but this time not only by financial or political support of favored candidates but by manufacturing and spreading false narratives, hacking electoral systems, hence manufacturing desired results of undermining the credibility of elections.

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Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili distinguishes himself as an accomplished leader in government, crisis management, and diplomacy. As the founder of TY Strategies LLC, he extends advisory services globally. A pivotal figure in co-founding the Revival Foundation, aiding Ukraine, and leading the New International Leadership Institute, Yakobashvili held key roles, including Georgia’s Ambassador to the U.S. and Deputy Prime Minister. With the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, he is a Yale World Fellow, trained at Oxford and Harvard. As a co-founder and chair of the Governing Board of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, he actively contributes to global media discussions on regional security. His significant contributions have merited the Presidential Medal of Excellence.



ed by Russia. Opposition parties and independent observers have [identified](#) the methods and tactics used to manipulate Georgia's 26 October 2024 parliamentary elections, [describing](#) them as not just "unfree and unfair" but outright "stolen." The tactics employed likely deserve dedicated analysis and multiple articles, which this volume addresses in other sections. This article, however, will focus on the aftermath of the stolen elections and explore potential responses from the United States and the Western democracies more broadly.

Previous elections in Georgia were never ideal but mainly reflected the wish of the Georgian people, except for the last two parliamentary and presidential elections.

An important disclaimer – previous elections in Georgia were never ideal but mainly reflected the wish of the Georgian people, except for the last two parliamentary and presidential elections. During the 2020 parliamentary elections, the opposition [refused](#) to recognize falsified election results and refused to enter the parliament. Only active intervention of the West, spearheaded by the EU, [convinced](#) the opposition to change its mind while the government undertook a number of obligations to address the opposition's concerns. Not surprisingly, the government disregarded all obligations and continued business as usual as if nothing had happened. It is hard to imagine what or who may persuade the current Georgian opposition, jointly or separately, to step into the same trap. Nevertheless, it is still worth exploring what tools or mechanisms the West possesses for addressing a new political crisis in Georgia.

An American Toolbox

All election results finally come to one crucial junction—legitimacy. Obviously, the primary concern is domestic legitimacy, where autocratic regimes have many options to “normalize” *fait accompli*. Another question is external legitimacy where multiple actors may have diverging attitudes. Questionable international legitimacy profoundly limits the area of maneuver for a not-fully-legitimate government, resulting in serious international isolation, triggering negative economic and financial implications, and causing intense discontent inside the country.

In international relations, the non-recognition of election results is not a novelty. Such statements are often made by countries that challenge the legitimacy of electoral processes they see as flawed, undemocratic, or manipulated. The United States has been active in its stance of non-recognition toward specific election outcomes, especially in cases where it perceives violations of democratic standards, human rights abuses, or attempts by authoritarian leaders to cling to power.

The Georgian case indicates the need to extend that list of “punishable” violations since new methodologies of election rigging were discovered and employed. It surely necessitates new approaches for response as well.

The US typically does not recognize election results when it determines that severe irregularities, manipulation, or coercion marred elections. Key factors in these decisions include transparency, freedom for candidates to campaign, independence of election commissions, the participation of international observers, and access to an independent judiciary. When these elements are significantly compromised, the US may declare the

election invalid, supporting this stance with diplomatic measures. The Georgian case indicates the need to extend that list of “punishable” violations since new methodologies of election rigging were discovered and employed. It surely necessitates new approaches for response as well.

A classical US response to “stolen” elections can be seen in several previous instances such as Belarus, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. After widespread allegations of vote-rigging and violent crackdowns on peaceful protesters by President Alexander Lukashenko’s government in the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections, the US [refused](#) to recognize the legitimacy of the results. Similarly, following the 2018 Venezuelan presidential election, in which President Nicolás Maduro claimed victory, the US [rejected](#) the results, citing a lack of transparency, political repression, and the exclusion of opposition candidates from the process. In the 2024 elections, the US [recognized](#) the victory of an opposition candidate, Edmundo Gonzales, who was forced to flee to Spain because of the persecution from the Maduro regime.

Sanctions

In addition to verbal condemnation and non-recognition of the election results, the US imposed sanctions on key figures within Lukashenko’s government in Belarus following the 2020 elections. These sanctions froze the regime’s assets and prohibited Americans from conducting business with them, forming part of a broader effort to restrict the government’s international operations and demonstrate support for the Belarusian opposition. Similarly, in Venezuela, the US [imposed](#) economic sanctions on the state oil company PDVSA, a significant revenue source for the government, aiming to weaken Maduro’s grip on power by disrupting critical funding streams.

Another example is Myanmar, where the military annulled the results of the 2020 general election

and staged a coup in early 2021. The US [responded](#) by imposing sanctions on Myanmar's military leaders and state-owned enterprises. By restricting access to international markets and financial institutions, the sanctions aimed to pressure the military government to restore democratic governance.

Diplomatic Isolation

The US used diplomatic isolation to respond to the 2021 Nicaraguan presidential election in which Daniel Ortega was re-elected after sidelining opposition candidates and cracking down on dissent. By declaring the elections illegitimate and limiting diplomatic interactions, the US distanced itself from Ortega's government and supported calls for genuine democratic reforms. Similarly, the US refused to recognize the legitimacy of Nicolás Maduro's presidency in Venezuela and instead recognized opposition leader Juan Guaidó as the interim president. This was a significant diplomatic step, positioning the US in alignment with the Venezuelan opposition.

Simultaneously, the US often leverages multilateral forums such as the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the European Union to build a coalition of countries that share its position on election legitimacy. By forming alliances and garnering international support, the US amplifies the effect of diplomatic isolation. However, such isolation is sometimes only partial. Countries like China, Russia, Iran, Türkiye, and others frequently breach imposed isolation by successfully providing viable alternatives to American support.

Support for Opposition and Civil Society

In addition to imposing sanctions and diplomatic measures, the US supports opposition groups and civil society organizations that advocate for

democracy and human rights. This support takes various forms, including financial aid, training programs, and public endorsement of opposition leaders. The goal is to strengthen the capacity of these groups to advocate for democratic reforms, document abuses, and engage with the public.

For instance, in Belarus, the US has assisted opposition leaders such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who ran against Lukashenko in the 2020 election. Tsikhanouskaya and her supporters continue to [receive](#) diplomatic backing and resources to organize their campaign for democratic change. Similarly, the US has provided funding and logistical support to Venezuelan opposition parties and civil society groups.

Another case is Hong Kong, where the US [supported](#) pro-democracy movements in the face of China's increasing control. While the US could not directly influence Hong Kong's elections, it condemned Beijing's interference, introduced sanctions against Chinese and Hong Kong officials responsible for suppressing democracy, and provided a haven to activists facing persecution. This reflects the US commitment to democratic values even in complex geopolitical situations.

Effectiveness of the US Approach

In some cases, sanctions have hurt authoritarian regimes economically, reducing their ability to finance repression. However, in other cases, sanctioned governments have shifted their economic partnerships, trading with countries that are less critical of their actions, such as China, Russia, Iran, Cuba, and others.

While US measures of non-recognition, sanctions, and support for opposition movements have shown

effectiveness in signaling disapproval, they have had varying levels of success in achieving concrete political change. In some cases, sanctions have hurt authoritarian regimes economically, reducing their ability to finance repression. However, in other cases, sanctioned governments have shifted their economic partnerships, trading with countries that are less critical of their actions, such as China, Russia, Iran, Cuba, and others.

Critics argue that US non-recognition policies can sometimes worsen humanitarian conditions by exacerbating economic difficulties. In Venezuela, for example, sanctions on the oil industry severely impacted the economy, affecting ordinary citizens and the government. Additionally, some observers contend that US non-recognition policies lack consistency as broader geopolitical interests sometimes influence them.

There is also criticism that non-recognition policies, while morally justified, may be insufficient to counteract authoritarian regimes. These regimes often have entrenched power structures and control over state institutions, making it difficult for external pressure to spur democratic transitions. In these cases, sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and support for opposition movements may not be enough to bring about immediate change, leading to a protracted struggle between authoritarian rulers and opposition groups.

New Realities Require New Tools

As the global political landscape becomes increasingly complex, the effectiveness of these non-recognition policies will depend on multilateral cooperation, consistency, and adaptability to new challenges. The non-recognition of election results reflects a commitment not only to specific democratic principles but also to the broader values of human rights and the rule of law that are fundamental to international relations.

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The Georgian case differs significantly from the examples mentioned. Unlike Venezuela, Georgia lacks strategic resources like oil that could sustain an autocratic regime, and it does not present immigration challenges for the US as some Latin American countries do. Additionally, Georgia's relationship with Russia is less economically, militarily, and politically extensive than Belarus, and it has advanced significantly in aligning its institutions and legal frameworks with those of the EU. The current Georgian ruling regime largely depends on a single individual, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who differs considerably from figures like Lukashenko, Maduro, or Ortega. Moreover, the majority of Georgians remain committed to EU and NATO integration. As a result, approach to Georgia should be more nuanced to have a higher likelihood of success.

While the “traditional” methodology still applies to the Georgian case, several extra actions can benefit the country and increase the chances of it returning to the Euro-Atlantic orbit.

An External Investigation of the Electoral Fraud

Western governments' [calls](#) to investigate election fraud claims are reasonable initial steps. Still, they will yield no results if the investigation is solely left in the hands of the current government. In a best-case scenario, this could lead to an oxymoronic catch-22, resulting in masquerade and mockery of “investigation” with predictable assessments that no significant fraud has been committed. Therefore, an external investi-

gation is essential. Currently, there is no proper international body that can be assigned to this job. Still, with appropriate political goodwill, an ad hoc coalition of election monitoring organizations, such as the OSCE/ODIHR, plus professional non-for-profit institutions, such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors of the NDI and other members of the Global Network for Securing Electoral Integrity should be invited. The USAID should finance the group's activity and be limited in time to avoid a lengthy bureaucratic process. That group can examine claims and results of the election monitoring missions, as well as claims and evidence from the opposition parties, and determine if the evidence of falsification is valid and if new snap elections are merited. If the answer is YES, the following steps should be invoked.

Sanctions

The primary target for personal sanctions should be Bidzina Ivanishvili and his immediate family and political entourage, even if they do not hold an official position in any governmental institution. Sanctions should also be extended to officials, especially those responsible for falsifying elections.

Besides “visa bans,” sanctions should include enforcement of financial restrictions, including the banking abilities of sanctioned individuals.

As defiance of the opposition will continue, most likely, the current government will resort to more oppressive measures. The same applies to civil society actors, who are declared as “foreign agents” due to the recently adopted Russian-style law on “transparency of foreign influence.” In such cases, immediate sanctions should be extended to initiators and executors of the

oppressive orders. Unlike in previous sanctioning cases, the names of targeted individuals should be made public upon imposition of sanctions. Besides “visa bans,” sanctions should include enforcement of financial restrictions, including the banking abilities of sanctioned individuals (all of them enjoy Visa and Master Card services in Georgian or European banks). Those banks should receive a clear signal that such services are consequential.

Diplomatic Isolation

In addition to traditional diplomatic isolation and cutting off bilateral government-to-government programs, it is imperative to limit the government's access to international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the EBRD, the IFC, etc. While isolation will not be hermetic, it will clearly signal to the population of Georgia that the current government does not reflect the people's wish for Euro-Atlantic integration enshrined in the constitution, further undermining its domestic legitimacy.

Support to the Opposition and Civil Society

While the measures mentioned can empower opposition and civil society to challenge the autocratic Georgian Dream regime better, there is no doubt that the current government will attempt to stifle these groups financially and cut off their resources.

This policy is currently well-established but it must be explicitly stated by the returning Trump administration that support will focus on local actors and not involve financing institutions in exile, as seen in the cases of Venezuela and Belarus. Georgia continues to have an active, albeit

fragmented, civil society capable of opposition, even if some of its leaders face imprisonment. While the measures mentioned can empower opposition and civil society to challenge the autocratic Georgian Dream regime better, there is no doubt that the current government will attempt to stifle these groups financially and cut off their resources. Simultaneously, calls for the release of imprisoned former President Mikheil Saakashvili and other political prisoners (including the potential new ones) should be renewed as part of a comprehensive pressure strategy. Otherwise, it is likely that the current president, Salome Zourabichvili, could join the third president in jail, possibly followed by former President Giorgi Margvelashvili, as both regard the recent elections as illegitimate.

Weaponization of the Elections

There is more than a Georgian case to determine that malicious actors see democratic elections as an opportunity to weaponize them against democracies. The most recent election in Moldova showcases how determined and sophisticated adversaries of democracy can be.

Unfortunately, the same can be observed in a number of fragile Eastern European countries, some Western European countries, and the US, where evidence of various election interference attempts is discovered almost daily. Winning Georgia back will be essential for reverting such attempts. If not, the “license to steal” may indeed become a “license to kill,” leading to entrenched authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and erosion of trust in democracy’s core pillar – free and fair elections. With both “tough love” and tangible support, I believe Georgia and its people can prevail ■

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