

A Sink or Swim Moment for Georgia's Opposition

Georgia's opposition today stands at its weakest since independence. State repression, deliberate fragmentation, and internal missteps have left it marginalized, disoriented, and facing possible elimination. The old question — whether the opposition can win — has given way to a starker one: whether it can survive at all.

Since 2012, the Georgian Dream has [built](#) an authoritarian one-party state that dominates courts and media, weaponizes state institutions, and borrows freely from the Russian playbook of outlawing real competitors. For now, token competition remains, but by 2026, Georgia may be left only with regime-approved parties and an underground opposition.

The coming months are decisive. The October 2025 local elections, the protests that will follow, and the approach to 2026 will determine whether Georgia still has a democratic alternative or slides

into consolidated authoritarianism. For the opposition, unity is no longer optional but existential — and it cannot be improvised months before a vote. It must begin now: joint fundraising, coordinated messaging, and a credible program that shows change means competence, not chaos. Yet, history suggests such unification will be painfully difficult.

For Georgia's Western partners, however, this opposition — fractured and self-defeating as it may be — is still the only democratic, pro-European alternative. Alongside critical media and civil society, it remains the last barrier to authoritarian consolidation. Its flaws cannot justify Western disengagement.

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SERGI KAPANADZE
Editor and Contributor

Dr Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International relations and European integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Kapanadze is a Senior Researcher and Head of the International Relations Department at the research institute Gnomon Wise. He is a founder and a chairman of the board of the Tbilisi - based think - tank GRASS (Georgia's Reforms Associates). Dr Kapanadze was a vice - speaker of the Parliament of Georgia in 2016 - 2020 and a deputy Foreign Minister in 2011 - 2012. He received a Ph.D. in International relations from the Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.



alternative. Alongside critical media and civil society, it remains the last barrier to authoritarian consolidation. Its flaws cannot justify Western disengagement. To withhold support because the opposition is not “perfect” would be to hand Bidzina Ivanishvili what he seeks: a monopoly at home and isolation abroad. In hybrid regimes, one does not choose the opposition one would like — one works with the opposition that exists.

Weak But Still a Force to Reckon With

The Georgian opposition in 2025 is perhaps the weakest it has been since independence. Yet, it remains a serious obstacle to the one-party system Ivanishvili seeks to cement. Past rulers also enjoyed dominance — Shevardnadze over fractious warlords, Saakashvili after the Rose Revolution over the splintered opposition parties — but never has the political field been so full of alternatives and, at the same time, so short on resources and strategy. The Georgian Dream has perfected not just the art of winning elections but of steadily eroding and, if trends hold, eliminating opposition as a viable force altogether.

The strategy begins with leadership. Georgia's prisons [hold](#) nearly every central pro-European party leader: Mikheil Saakashvili, Giorgi Vashadze, Nika Gvaramia, Nika Melia, and Zurab Japaridze. Lelo's Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze were [freed](#) only recently; Giorgi Gakharia remains in [self-exile](#) in Germany. Others still operate in Tbilisi but in disarray, while Salome Zourabichvili tries, awkwardly, to fill the vacuum. The consequences have a ripple effect: weak political leadership cripples protests, discourages younger activists, and reinforces the sense that politics leads to prison, not power.

Finances, or the lack thereof, tighten the noose further. Boycotts deprived parties of state sub-

sidies, and donors have taken a pause, while the Georgian Dream weaponizes the state budget to bankroll the ruling party and uses state institutions to bankrupt rivals. In 2024, it outspent all opponents three to one; the pattern is repeating in 2025. The media landscape completes the picture. *Imedi TV*, *POSTV*, *the Public Broadcaster*, and *Rustavi 2*, together with social media propaganda, brand the opposition as corrupt, chaotic, reckless, and foreign-controlled. Exploiting national traumas, the Georgian Dream frames itself as promoting peace and stability while the opposition is portrayed as advocating war and chaos.

To be sure, opposition mistakes have worsened the crisis — splintering into rival factions, boycotts that backfired, coalitions that collapsed under egos. However, these missteps occurred on a battlefield already tilted: leaders were jailed, coffers were empty, and the media was hostile. Against those odds, errors became near-fatal. Still, the opposition endures, surviving in fragile coalitions that keep alive, however tenuously, the possibility of democratic resistance.

Horizons of the Opposition — Elections, Protests, and the Specter of Outlawing

Every political movement lives under horizons — near and distant events that shape its fate. For Georgia's opposition in 2025, those horizons are vivid: the release of imprisoned leaders in early 2026, the 4 October elections, the protests that will follow, and the looming possibility of outright outlawing sometime this fall.

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Georgia's opposition in 2025, those horizons are vivid: the release of imprisoned leaders in early 2026, the 4 October elections, the protests that will follow, and the looming possibility of outright outlawing sometime this fall. Together, they will decide whether Georgia remains pluralist or drifts into full authoritarianism.

The first horizon is the release of jailed leaders. Figures like Giorgi Vashadze, Nika Gvaramia, Nika Melia, and Zurab Japaridze could return to political life with the legitimacy of martyrdom but only next year. Yet, their comeback could just as easily reignite rivalries that have long plagued the opposition. The choice is between unity and renewed fragmentation. Vashadze and Japaridze [called](#) for unity from prison but this has not been received positively by all political parties. Thus, those political parties that are now active might not necessarily embrace the returned politicians' ideas for unity or follow their lead.

The second horizon is 4 October 2025 – local elections, [boycotted](#) by all pro-Western opposition parties, [but](#) Lelo – Strong Georgia and Gakharia's For Georgia. No one expects a fair contest: the Georgian Dream dominates state resources, commissions, media, and disinformation. They have unlimited access to the personal data of voters, including those currently abroad. They can easily manipulate this information to run local campaigns, especially since foreign-based Georgians do not vote in local elections. The likeliest outcome will be a vote marred by irregularities and denounced by the opposition. But that is not new. With the major opposition parties boycotting the elections, a critically minded electorate will stay home so the Georgian Dream's efforts will be significantly less than in October 2024.

The local elections are always won in Georgia by the winners of previous parliamentary elections – that is a rule, a tradition of a sort. The only time in recent history when the local elections had na-

tional importance was in 2021 when the [return](#) of Mikheil Saakashvili galvanized the political process. But even then, the opposition could not do better than to win just one municipality and local councils in several cities. This time around, the opposition will not even come close to the results of 2021. This is also because those elections saw a high participation rate since the preceding [Charles Michel agreement](#) provided for the possibility to call parliamentary elections if the ruling party did not clear 43% nationwide vote.

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That brings us to the third horizon: the streets. In Georgia, elections rarely conclude at the ballot box; they often spill over into protest. For mobilization to succeed this time, three ingredients are indispensable: unity among opposition forces, disciplined non-violent tactics, and defections from within state structures. Without these, the Georgian Dream's repressive arsenal – arrests, harassment of NGOs, intimidation of journalists – will again dismantle demonstrations just as it has done before.

The 4 October protest is already shaping up as a pivotal moment. Two figures, the United National Movement's (UNM) Levan Khabeishvili and former opera singer Paata Burchuladze, [have emerged](#) as its visible leaders – and they will almost certainly be among the first targets for arrest if the protest turns violent. Yet, preparations are underway regardless: a rally on 13 September as a precursor followed by a massive demonstration on election day itself.

The stakes are made explicit in the rhetoric on both sides. The opposition's promo for 4 October is nothing less than a "peaceful overthrow of Ivan-

ishvili's regime." The regime's counter-message is equally [blunt](#): step outside the bounds of legality and arrests will follow. Georgia is thus set on a collision course — one that will test not only the opposition's resolve but also the regime's capacity to contain dissent without tipping into outright authoritarian violence.

Finally comes the most ominous horizon: outlawing. After 4 October when the dust settles, the Georgian Dream will utilize the legal tools it [developed](#) earlier this year to dissolve opposition parties, a move reminiscent of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko or Russian President Vladimir Putin. The investigative [report](#) of the Tsulukiani Commission set the ground for that. As Georgian Dream leaders [have claimed](#), they will address the Constitutional Court with the request to ban pro-European political parties. The Court will likely follow the suit.

Each horizon is also a cliff. To survive, the opposition must prepare now: build unity before leaders walk free, organize resilient protests after the elections, demonstrate that boycotted elections are deeply flawed, plan disciplined protests, establish regional outreach, and prepare legal defenses against dissolution. Without this preparation, the horizons will not open doors but close them — leaving Georgia with the façade of democracy and the reality of an uncontested one-party rule.

The Faces Behind the Bars

Authoritarian regimes often believe that by imprisoning their opponents, they remove them from politics. Yet, history shows that prison can give politicians symbolic capital that no campaign could buy. In Georgia today, this paradox defines the opposition. Many of its most prominent leaders are behind bars — removed from the daily grind of politics, yet still serving as the faces of repression and resilience.

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The most famous of these, of course, is Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's third president and the man whose name still dominates the political imagination two decades after the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili has been both the great hope and the great liability of Georgia's democratic opposition. To his admirers, he remains the modernizer who broke the back of corruption, built functioning institutions, and tied Georgia's fate to the Euro-Atlantic world. To his critics, he is the authoritarian reformer who governed with an iron hand, trampled civil liberties, and dragged Georgia into an unwinnable war in 2008. Since his dramatic return to Georgia in 2021 — a move that ended in arrest — Saakashvili has embodied both defiance and tragedy. His imprisonment under conditions described by the European Parliament as degrading has made him a cause célèbre in Western capitals. Yet, inside Georgia, his polarizing legacy still splits the opposition camp: some believe his eventual release will electrify the resistance. In contrast, others fear it will re-polarize society and hand the Georgian Dream the perfect scapegoat. Saakashvili remains, in every sense, the ghost in the machine of Georgian politics — present even in absence.

Nika Gvaramia, a leader of the *Ahali* party and *Coalition for Change*, symbolizes a different trajectory: that of the media fighter turned political prisoner. Once a lawyer and politician, Gvaramia became best known as the director of *Rustavi 2* and later the founder of *Mtavari Arkhi*, Georgia's most influential opposition television channel which is now

off the air. His imprisonment in 2022 on absurd charges was widely condemned by Human Rights Watch, the EU, and the U.S. State Department as politically motivated. He was even [awarded](#) the 2023 International Press Freedom Award. For many Georgians, his case was the clearest sign that the Georgian Dream would stop at nothing to muzzle dissenting voices. Ironically, by locking him up, the government transformed him from a media manager into a political figure. In the 2024 elections, Gvaramia's party – Coalition for Change [managed](#) to win the largest share of opposition votes. His party, however, has struggled significantly since three of its four leaders are currently behind bars.

Standing (or sitting) alongside him in both resistance and imprisonment is Nika Melia, the fiery former chair of the UNM and another co-leader of the *Coalition for Change*. Melia has become synonymous with protest politics in Georgia. Arrested multiple times, he is perhaps most remembered for 2021 when his detention on dubious charges prompted the resignation of then Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia who refused to oversee the crackdown. Melia is not a strategist or a policy wonk nor is he an ideologist; he is a mobilizer, a man who can fill the squares and keep crowds energized. His strength is also his weakness: his confrontational style makes him an easy target for the Georgian Dream's propaganda which paints him as a reckless radical. Yet, his endurance through years of arrests and harassment has given him a credibility no one can deny. In a future coalition, Melia may not be the one to craft a governing program but he could be indispensable as the opposition's chief mobilizer – the one who can channel anger into disciplined pressure.

Another figure with significant moral capital, albeit far less mass appeal, save among the youth, is Zurab Japaridze, the libertarian founder of *Girchi – More Freedom* and *Girchi* before that. Japaridze's politics often seem eccentric in a Georgian con-

text – advocating for marijuana legalization, radical economic liberalism, and limited government – but his reputation for honesty is unmatched. He is often described, even by critics, as the most principled politician in Georgia. Unlike many of his peers, he has consistently called for unity and criticized the opposition's obsession with personalities. His voter base is small but growing and his influence in shaping discourse is larger than numbers suggest. In many ways, Japaridze represents the conscience of the opposition – a reminder that integrity still matters. His time in prison, while less publicized than Saakashvili's or Gvaramia's, nonetheless strengthens his role as a bridge-builder who might coax rival camps toward cooperation.

The case of Giorgi Vashadze, leader of *Strategy the Builder*, illustrates another dimension of repression. Once an energetic coalition-maker, he, just like Japaridze, Melia, and Gvaramia, is now serving a sentence for not showing up at the parliamentary investigative commission. Ironically, Vashadze never held a position higher than deputy minister of justice during the Saakashvili administration and his work was closely tied to the development of the now-famous and pride-worthy civil registry, Public Service Halls, and Houses of Justice. Vashadze lacks the national brand of Saakashvili or the media power of Gvaramia but his organizational skills and willingness to work with others make him valuable. He is one of the few politicians who constantly advocate for unity. The relatively successful presidential campaign of the UNM's Gregory Vashadze in 2018 was also because Giorgi Vashadze served as his campaign chief. His imprisonment, like that of others, signals the Georgian Dream's strategy of decapitating all political leaders who keep movements together. For the opposition, his release could be important in terms of energy and stitching fragmented groups into a larger front.

If Gvaramia and Melia embody the resistance wing, and Japaridze and Vashadze represent the principled coalition-makers, then Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze have personified the failed promise of a centrist technocratic alternative. As founders of *Lelo* — both former banking executives — they arrived in politics aiming to spark a “Georgian Macron moment,” offering a pragmatic, pro-European option for the middle class and those who wanted neither the Georgian Dream nor the UNM. For a fleeting moment, they appeared to capture the hopes of voters disillusioned with both parties. But their campaign quickly unraveled: oversized local spending, alienation of street protest groups, and a confusing flirtation with Gakharia’s faction all estranged their base. Their imprisonment in June seemed to add a layered complexity—providing a symbolic claim to victimhood, yet happening on the back of a strategic misstep to partake in local elections which undermined confidence in *Lelo*’s seriousness and even split the party.

Then, in early September, President Kavelashvili pardoned both Khazaradze and Japaridze ahead of the 4 October local elections. Their release—while undeniably politically motivated—now poses a new question: is their pardon and return a shrewd maneuver positioning *Lelo* as the regime’s permitted opposition? Khazaradze himself dismissed the pardon, calling it a step aimed at sowing division among the opposition, insisting that unless all political prisoners are freed equally the gesture exposes the regime’s manipulation.

While not behind bars, there is also another oppressed political leader — Giorgi Gakharia, who represents another form of repression — opposition in exile. The former prime minister and founder of *For Georgia* now resides in Germany on a long-term visa avoiding what his allies call politically motivated prosecutions. He insists he has not sought asylum but uses his base in Berlin to work on EU integration issues and keep ties with

international partners. From abroad, he has stayed engaged in Georgian politics, warning against “uncontrolled chaos” and coordinating his party’s strategy even as investigations at home hang over him.

His exile, however, has polarized opinion. The Georgian Dream dismisses him as a coward, “counselling Georgians from Germany.” At the same time, some opposition leaders accuse him of fleeing responsibility and even contrast him to Saakashvili who actually returned to Georgia. Yet, many observers note that distance may be the only thing keeping him out of prison: probes into his past as interior minister and his handling of the 2019 protests could easily have led to charges if he returned. Gakharia thus stands as a symbol of a different kind of opposition silencing — not jailed, but effectively pushed out of the country, forced to choose between political relevance at home and personal safety abroad.

Taken together, these political figures embody the diversity — and dysfunction — of Georgia’s opposition. They span the spectrum: reformist presidents, media warriors, protest leaders, libertarians, coalition-makers, technocrats. Their imprisonment is meant to neutralize them but it also creates a pantheon of political victims that the Georgian Dream cannot entirely control. When they are released, likely in stages through 2026, the opposition will face a critical choice: treat them as rivals in a renewed scramble for dominance or integrate them into a leadership cabinet that symbolizes unity in diversity.

Prison has not only weakened the opposition; it has offered one last chance to recognize that their struggle is not about personalities but about preserving the democratic space itself.

The danger, of course, is that old patterns will re-

turn. Saakashvili's polarizing aura could reanimate the “anti-Misha” vote and scare moderates. Melia's street-first approach could alienate cautious centrists. Khazaradze's pragmatic survivalism could be read as opportunism. Without a unifying mechanism, the release of these leaders could split the opposition even more. Yet, the opportunity is just as real. Their combined legitimacy as political prisoners, their symbolic authority, and their different skill sets could form the nucleus of a truly broad coalition — if, and only if, they are willing to subsume ego for survival. In this sense, prison has not only weakened the opposition; it has offered one last chance to recognize that their struggle is not about personalities but about preserving the democratic space itself.

Lessons from a Decade of Fragmentation

For more than a decade, Georgia's opposition has replayed the same debate: unite behind one banner or diversify into multiple parties. Each cycle has tilted toward fragmentation and each has ended the same way — the Georgian Dream entrenched in power, the opposition scattered and defeated.

The logic of diversification once seemed persuasive. The UNM, burdened by Saakashvili's polarizing legacy, could not mobilize all anti-Georgian Dream voters; new parties were meant to capture the disillusioned middle. From Alasania and Burchuladze in 2016 to European Georgia in 2017 and later Lelo, Girchi, and *Strategy the Builder*, each experiment promised renewal. None succeeded. The votes split and the Georgian Dream tightened its grip.

The 2020 elections starkly revealed this flaw. Opposition parties together won nearly half the vote but still handed the Georgian Dream an easy majority. The boycott that followed only deepened their weakness, costing them institutional leverage and financing. The 2024 elections added insult: the

UNM [lost](#) its primacy to the *Coalition for Change* but the opposition bloc as a whole did not grow. It simply reshuffled itself while the Georgian Dream remained secure.

The lesson is clear. Diversification has not expanded the electorate or persuaded the undecided. It has drained resources, confused voters, and guaranteed defeat. Unity is not easy — the UNM remains toxic for many, egos abound, coalitions often look artificial — but disunity is suicidal.

What makes 2025 different is the cost of failure. In earlier years, defeat meant another cycle in opposition. Today, it could mean extinction. With the [“foreign agents” law](#) and [captured courts](#), the Georgian Dream has the legal tools to dissolve parties altogether. If opposition leaders enter 2026 divided, they risk not just another electoral loss (whenever the elections come) but the elimination of pluralism itself.

For the first time since independence, the opposition is not merely split into two or three factions but into four distinct centers of gravity. Each of these poles claims to embody the democratic alternative, cultivating its own identity and narrative, and insisting that the others are compromised or inadequate. Together, they form what should be a diverse coalition capable of representing every segment of Georgian society. Separately, they form a mosaic of weakness that only strengthens the Georgian Dream's hand.

The most visible and dynamic of these centers is the *Coalition for Change*, anchored by Nika Gvaramia and Nika Melia, and flanked by Elene Khoshtaria's *Droa* and Zurab Japaridze's *Girchi – More Freedom*. This bloc emerged from the frustrations of 2024 when Gvaramia and Melia successfully outpolled the once-dominant UNM, proving that the old hegemon could be displaced. In form and rhetoric, the *Coalition for Change* is the closest thing Georgia has to a movement rather than just a party. Its leaders

speak the language of protest, youth, and Europe. Its voter base is concentrated in Tbilisi and other urban centers where young professionals, students, and the pro-European middle class resonate with its message. Gvaramia's background in media gives the coalition constant visibility while Melia's skill as a protest leader ensures its capacity to mobilize crowds. Yet, for all its energy, the coalition has limitations. Its reach into rural Georgia is thin, its leaders' egos clash, and its protest-oriented politics often alienate cautious moderates. The coalition embodies the promise of a new generation but without broader infrastructure, it risks becoming another urban phenomenon unable to break the Georgian Dream's hold on the countryside. In addition, three of its four leaders are currently behind bars.

The second pole, the *United National Movement*, still matters despite its decline. The UNM is no longer the central opposition party it once was; its 2024 electoral humiliation confirmed as much. But it remains the only party with a truly national footprint. Across Georgia's regions, the UNM retains offices, activists, and local structures that no other opposition party can match. Its brand might be toxic but its machine still exists. Approximately 10–15% (used to be a solid 25%) of Georgians [remain](#) loyal to the UNM despite its controversies. This core ensures its continued relevance. Yet, the UNM suffers from the same problems that have haunted it since 2012: its association with Saakashvili's polarizing rule, its failure to counter toxic propaganda, and its inability to shed the image of authoritarian excess. In polls, the UNM consistently registers among the most disliked parties, a fact that the Georgian Dream exploits relentlessly. Still, dismissing the UNM as irrelevant would be a mistake. Any serious opposition coalition will have to incorporate its structures, its activists, and its base — while somehow containing the toxicity of its brand.

The third center is the bloc formed by *Lelo* and Giorgi Gakharia's *For Georgia* party. Once imagined

as the great centrist alternative, this grouping has withered, yet it clings to relevance. *Lelo*, founded by Khazaradze and Japaridze, entered politics promising technocratic competence and business-friendly reform. Gakharia, as a former prime minister who [broke](#) with the Georgian Dream in 2021, positioned himself as the pragmatic, security-minded centrist who could appeal to moderates. For a moment, this seemed like a formula capable of attracting voters weary of both the Georgian Dream and the UNM. But the experiment faltered. *Lelo* overspent in local elections, alienated protesters, and confused its base by cozying up to Gakharia. Gakharia himself never shook off the stigma of the dispersal of the 20 June protests, leaving many to doubt his democratic credentials. Today, this bloc's strengths lie not in mass mobilization but in networks of business elites, technocrats, and international credibility. They are weak at the grassroots level, mistrusted by much of the protest camp, yet not entirely irrelevant. Their survival strategy seems to be positioning themselves as the “reasonable” opposition — but in a context where the Georgian Dream has moved to outlaw dissent, such moderation risks irrelevance.

Finally, there is the loosely knit coalition known as “*The Eight*,” orbiting around President Salome Zourabichvili. Of all the opposition poles, this one is the vaguest, yet it highlights a critical fact: some form of institutional opposition still survives. Although elected with the Georgian Dream's backing, Zourabichvili has steadily broken with the ruling party, [vetoing controversial laws](#) and voicing [criticisms](#) that have won her cautious respect in opposition circles. Her allies — from *Ahali* and *Droa* to the *Federalists*, *Freedom Square*, and the remnants of *European Georgia* — position themselves as a bridge between the street opposition and the presidency.

Their strength lies less in mobilizing crowds than in offering institutional legitimacy. As a former head of state with French citizenship and deep diplomatic ties, Zourabichvili is a valuable interlocutor

in Brussels, Paris, and Washington. Yet, “*The Eight*” is fragile: lacking local structures, organizational architecture, a unifying leader, or a clear narrative, the grouping risks sliding into irrelevance unless folded into a broader umbrella coalition.

What makes this fourfold fragmentation so dangerous is not just the division of votes but the division of narratives. Georgians do not hear a unified story about what the opposition stands for; they hear competing, sometimes contradictory tales. The *Coalition for Change* claims to be the fresh alternative. The UNM insists it remains the only true national force. Lelo and Gakharia claim to be the pragmatic, centrist fix. Zourabichvili’s allies emphasize moderation and institutionalism. To the average voter, this cacophony reinforces the Georgian Dream’s narrative: that the opposition is disorganized, selfish, and incapable of governing.

And yet, paradoxically, the fragmentation also reveals potential. Taken together, the four poles cover almost every demographic in Georgian society. Urban liberals find their voice in the *Coalition for Change*. Rural loyalists still align with the UNM. Middle-class moderates might identify with Lelo or Gakharia. Institutionalists and diplomatic elites gravitate toward Zourabichvili. The map is not one of irrelevance; it is one of misalignment. If these centers could be brought under one umbrella, they would form the broadest coalition in Georgia’s history — representing youth and age, city and countryside, radicals and moderates. The very diversity that now divides them could, under the right framework, become a strength.

The question is whether that transformation is possible. Georgian politics has never lacked for talk of unity but efforts have usually collapsed under the weight of egos, historical grudges, and tactical disagreements. Each center believes it has a claim to primacy. Each fears being swallowed by the others. The Georgian Dream understands this and actively fuels rivalries, amplifying the idea that unity is

both impossible and undesirable. Yet, the stakes in 2025 are different. In earlier years, fragmentation meant defeat but it also meant survival. Today, fragmentation could mean annihilation. If the Georgian Dream proceeds with outlawing genuine opposition parties, there may be no second chances.

The Morning After 4 October: What Can and Probably Will Not Be Done

For years, opposition unity in Georgia has existed more in rhetoric than in practice. Before every election, party leaders spoke of it as a necessity, even an inevitability. Yet, each cycle ended the same: rivalries hardened, egos clashed, tactical disagreements overwhelmed strategy, and hastily arranged pacts collapsed under the first pressure. Unity became ritual rather than reality, a hollow prayer whispered before predictable defeat.

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But 2025 is not 2016, nor even 2020 and 2024. This time, the stakes are existential. The Georgian Dream has built an [architecture of repression](#) that leaves no room for repeated mistakes. With over 20 repressive laws passed, the Foreign Agents Law in force, the Anti-Corruption Bureau repurposed as a weapon, the judiciary and electoral commissions captured, and the media ecosystem dominated, disunity no longer means another cycle in opposition. It means extinction, outlawing, exile, or silence.

The reasons are plain. Repression has already gutted opposition leadership with some jailed and others forced abroad. A fragmented opposition gives the Georgian Dream easy targets — one par-

ty banned here, another harassed there. A united front would make such repression far harder to justify and resilience would be stronger. Public fatigue compounds the danger: most Georgians now tell pollsters they view the opposition as divided and ineffective. A broad coalition, visible and credible, is the only thing that can restore faith in alternatives. International impatience seals the argument. Brussels and Washington have grown weary of actors too weak and divided to be taken seriously. A united opposition could attract real pressure on the Georgian Dream; a divided one will be ignored.

Yet unity, even if achieved, is not enough. Georgians are skeptical not just because parties are divided but because they doubt the opposition can govern. Protests, boycotts, and hunger strikes do not build trust in competence. The Georgian Dream has skillfully portrayed itself as the only force capable of keeping the lights on, paying pensions, and maintaining “stability.” Unless the opposition proves otherwise, voters will continue to settle for the devil they know.

That proof must come through a credible government-in-waiting: an umbrella coalition anchored in shared principles of democracy, European integration, and power-sharing, reinforced by a program of competence. Such a government-in-waiting also needs very bold ideas for a program. The myth of a messiah must finally be abandoned. Georgia will not produce another Saakashvili nor does it need to. Instead, it needs a leadership cabinet representing all wings. Such a cabinet would diffuse egos, project inclusivity, and assure voters that no single faction could hijack power.

This leadership must also be visible. A Common Assembly, televised and regular, could allow Georgians to witness something they have never seen: their politicians debating in public, disagreeing openly, and yet deciding collectively. In a society cynical about politics, this spectacle of transparent deliberation could be revolutionary. This could also

serve as a ground for genuine primaries – granted that there will still be elections to contest.

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But leadership and transparency are still only the framework. To win — or even to survive — the opposition must do the hard work of politics: raising money, mapping voters, tailoring messages, and embedding itself in daily life across the country. Here, the failures of the past are most glaring. In 2024, the Georgian Dream outspent the opposition three to one. Unless opposition parties pool resources into a single campaign fund and share infrastructure — one office per district, staffed jointly — they will starve again. Diaspora communities, long underutilized, could be mobilized but only if they are convinced that their money supports unity rather than factional vanity projects. If the opposition cannot unite its wallets, why should voters believe it can unite the country?

The next step is understanding the electorate. For too long, opposition slogans have been generic — democracy, Europe, anti-corruption. These are important but polls show voters care most about jobs, healthcare, pensions, and poverty. The opposition must tailor its messages. Fear of war — the Georgian Dream’s strongest narrative — must be met not with denial but with reframing. Unlike the Georgian Dream, which has produced nothing from its bilateral channel with Russia, opposition leaders can point to real experience: the 2005 base [withdrawal](#), [the WTO deal](#), and the [Geneva talks](#) that followed in 2008. The message must be clear: the Georgian Dream appeases Russia; we can negotiate with Russia.

Finally, the opposition must outweigh the Georgian Dream socially. Elections are not just about ballots

but about legitimacy. The ruling party mobilizes networks of teachers, public employees, and pensioners through fear and patronage. To counter this, the opposition must embed itself in daily life: in schools, unions, professional associations, student groups, and villages. It must not only fill Tbilisi squares but also sit in village kitchens and town halls, listening and persuading.

Time is the most precious resource. The Georgian Dream campaigns years in advance; the opposition scrambles only in the final months. That must change. Whether national elections happen in 2026, 2027, or 2028, the opposition must treat them as imminent. Campaigning cannot be episodic; it must be continuous. Outreach cannot be reactive; it must be permanent. Resources must be budgeted not just for one campaign but for an indefinite struggle. A long game means planning for surprises with contingency strategies from Plan A through Plan Z. Anything less is surrender.

What can be done, then, is clear: build an umbrella coalition, present a credible program, pool resources, map voters, craft disciplined narratives, and begin campaigning now across the entire country. What probably will not be done is also clear: egos will resist dilution, parties will hoard resources, messaging will scatter, and the habit of improvisation will prevail. But the difference in 2025 is that failure carries a finality it never did before. If unity and competence are not achieved, the opposition will not simply lose another election. It will vanish.

The task of saving Georgia, therefore, cannot be postponed again. Whether elections come in 2028 as scheduled or earlier in a manufactured crisis, the opposition must be ready. Ready with structures in every region, with a single fund, with a disciplined message, with a government-in-waiting. Ready to survive repression, ready to counter propaganda, ready to show Georgians they have a real choice. The opposition must replicate what Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan did before de-

throning Armen Sarkissian and the Republican Party in Armenia or what Peter Magyar is now doing in Hungary – but it needs to be done on a grander and longer scale.

The choice is really simple. The 4 October rally is a good idea – it could lead to mass mobilization and serious pressure on Ivanishvili. However, there will be a morning after and if the planned “peaceful revolution” is unsuccessful, the opposition needs to switch to Plan B and then Plan C. But these plans must be prepared now. If not, history will not wait. Nor will Ivanishvili.

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At the same time, Georgia's Western partners must accept a difficult truth: the opposition they have is the opposition that exists. It is fractured, imperfect, often self-destructive – yet it remains the only genuinely pro-European, democratic force left standing against the consolidation of one-party rule. To withhold support because these forces are messy or divided would be to hand Ivanishvili a monopoly on legitimacy. The EU and the United States cannot afford “Georgia fatigue.” Even flawed actors deserve backing if they are the last barrier between the country and authoritarianism. Media, civil society, and opposition parties must all remain part of the democratic ecosystem that the West continues to fund and defend. For, in hybrid regimes, the choice is not between the ideal opposition and a bad one. The choice is between supporting flawed democrats or abandoning the field to autocrats ■