

GEO POLITICS

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GEORGIAN ELECTIONS 2024



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Our Mission

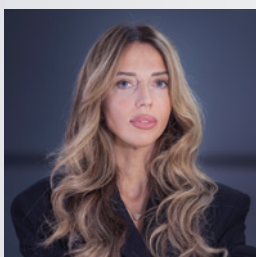
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual 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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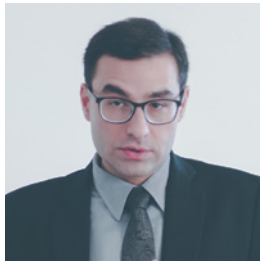
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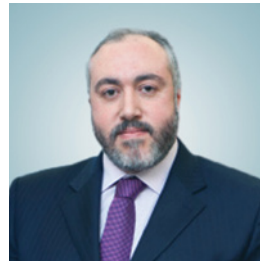
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From Sportive Summer to Political Fall: A Moment of Truth Approaching for Georgia

As the Olympics ended, Georgian elections – a national sport of a sort – entered full force in Georgia's daily life. Planned for October 26, 2024, these Parliamentary elections decide too many important issues – whether Georgia will stay isolated, whether authoritarian decline can be stopped, whether oligarchic rule continues, and whether the Russian law on foreign agents remains in force. Much like the Olympics, the emotions will be high as the Georgian Dream tackles four primary opposition parties.

The choice has never been so stark for Georgia – a decadent oligarch without any regard for European values against a mix of pro-Western opposition parties. With the Georgian Dream's win, the ominous policies of destroying political opponents, civil society, and the media will be implemented. With the opposition's win, Georgia's progress on the European integration path can be unlocked.

Thornike Gordadze opens the volume with an extended article that explores the ideological shift of the Georgian Dream party from early promises of social populism to far-right ethnonationalism, focusing on identity politics and cultural conservatism. As the party failed to deliver on its economic promises, it shifted its narrative to defending Georgian traditions, religion, and masculinity from perceived threats like LGBT groups and Western liberalism. GD's inconsistent ideology, moving from social-democratic alliances to far-right rhetoric, aligns with Soviet nostalgia and the romanticization of criminal subcultures to appeal to older conservative voters. This shift

and alliances with the Georgian Orthodox Church and local power figures risk steering Georgia away from democracy and European integration toward authoritarianism and isolation.

Jaba Devdariani continues the topic of ideological differences in politics and explores the idea of a “republican front” in France and its potential relevance for Georgia. In France, the mainstream political groups formed a “cordon sanitaire” to block far-right forces from gaining power, most notably in elections against Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front (now Rassemblement National). This mobilization cuts across left and right political lines to protect republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The article suggests that Georgia, which faces a similar rise in right-wing populism and anti-democratic tendencies, could benefit from such a strategy to defend its democratic institutions and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. However, given Georgia's fully proportional electoral system, the tactic may require adjustments. Ultimately, the article emphasizes the importance of broad agreement on protecting constitutional democracy to resist extremism.

Vano Chkhikvadze further explores the decline of democracy in Georgia under Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party. As the 2024 elections approach, the GD is seeking a constitutional majority to consolidate its control by outlawing opposition parties, enacting anti-LGBT laws, and maintaining a stronghold on national identity. Over the years, Ivanishvili has shifted from pro-Western rhetoric to authoritarianism, tolerating elite corruption and passing Russian-style foreign

agent laws that hinder Georgia's EU aspirations. This article suggests that the GD is pursuing a zero-sum game, which risks further isolation from the West if the ruling party continues its authoritarian path. The outcome of the October 2024 elections will determine whether Georgia continues its decline into autocracy or pursues its European future.

The electoral topic is picked up by Sergi Kapanadze, who analyzes the dynamics of the upcoming 2024 Georgian parliamentary elections. The article highlights the importance of the opposition parties' ability to clear the 5% electoral threshold to challenge the ruling Georgian Dream (GD). The article discusses electoral arithmetics, demonstrating that GD's strong support base of around 900,000 votes could be overcome with higher turnout and minimization of lost votes, as well as active engagement of youth and migrants. The article also addresses the missed opportunities and the importance of rallying behind a shared platform. Furthermore, it suggests that the coming months will see political maneuvering, potential scandals, and critical decisions that could still determine the election's outcome.

Shota Gvineria follows up on elections with the accent that traditional election observation missions, which focus on monitoring activities like vote-buying or intimidation during the election day, fail to capture the modern election manipulation tactics. These new methods, involving control over the information ecosystem and cyberspace, allow authoritarian regimes to manipulate elections well before voting begins. Using Georgia as a case study, the article explains how the Georgian Dream party consolidated control over the state's institutions, judiciary, and media to undermine democratic processes. The regime employs various digital

tools to intimidate opposition figures, spread disinformation, and manipulate voters through vote-buying and fear campaigns. Gvineria argues that election observation missions need to adapt their methodologies to detect these digital manipulations, emphasizing the need for more robust support from local watchdogs and civil society groups, as well as a shift toward monitoring social media and online behavior to ensure more transparent and fair elections.

The volume's last work by Temuri Yakobashvili discusses how global political and security dynamics have drastically shifted from the post-Cold War optimism described by Francis Fukuyama in the early 1990s. While Fukuyama predicted a peaceful global order dominated by liberal democracy, recent events have shown otherwise. The article highlights the rise of the Global South, growing nationalism, and the erosion of international law and human rights as critical global challenges. Countries like China, India, and Brazil are gaining influence while nationalism spreads, particularly in Western countries. International institutions like the UN and ICC are proving inadequate to enforce global peace, as seen in crises like Russia's war in Ukraine and Hamas' conflict with Israel. The disregard for human life, particularly by authoritarian regimes, underscores the deepening moral crisis in global governance. Yakobashvili further criticizes Georgia's contradictory political stance, as the country expresses a desire for Western integration while enacting policies that mirror authoritarian regimes, undermining its democratic institutions and positioning itself precariously in the international order ■

With Respect,

Editorial Team

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TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI

From “Free Money for All!” to “SOS! LGBT are Coming!”

Georgian Dream’s Drift from Social Populism to Nativist Ethnonationalism

Looking at the Georgian Dream’s (GD) election campaign in 2024, we notice a curious absence: socio-economic themes are hardly visible, but there is an over-investment in questions of identity, be they ethnic, religious, or gender-based. They are also mingled with conspiracy theories about the imminent danger of losing these. The GD, even by its very title, was conceived and founded as a populist party. As early as 2012, citizens were hearing enchanting promises about “free money,” “GEL 5 million per village,” “electricity and gas prices divided by two/three,” “wealth felt in everyone’s pocket,” “free cultivation, sowing, and transport of harvests to markets,” and “hundreds of factories opened,” etc.

As time passed and promises were broken, the GD switched from one populism to another. Social populism gave way to far-right populism.

However, as time passed and promises were broken, the GD switched from one populism to another. Social populism gave way to far-right populism. Forget poverty, unemployment, emigration, and rising prices; the real challenge is now to save our traditions, our religion, and the protection of Georgians, mainly Georgian men, from the homosexual contagion arriving with great speed from morally decadent Europe. To be more efficient in these titanic battles, the GD is asking citizens to



THORNIKE GORDADZE
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grant them a constitutional majority, as a victory against such evil is impossible without a constitutional ban on all the existing opposition, NGOs, and LGBT [propaganda](#).

Ideological Roamings

The Georgian Dream is not a political party in the classical sense. Still, it is a group of people united around the objective of remaining in power from which they derive income and the protection of their capital. The party's main political orientations depend to a large extent on safeguarding the financial and personal interests of Mr. Ivanishvili, who runs the party like a business and treats its members like employees. The constant feature of Ivanishvili's political action is the search for security for his money and family. Consequently, the party's ideology, like its geopolitical orientation, is volatile and changeable. Thus, from a party with social-democratic leanings in its early days, the GD has become a far-right party close to Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ. If before it "[cajoled European values](#)," now it denounces "liberal fascism" and "the global war party."

From the outset, the GD has flirted with the most obscurantist and anti-liberal ideas.

But the party's constant feature is populism. From the outset, the GD has flirted with the most obscurantist and anti-liberal ideas. Ivanishvili himself [claimed](#) in an interview that his favorite newspaper was Asaval-Dasavali, by far the most obscurantist, violently anti-Western, and anti-minority media on the Georgian market. At the time, as leader of the Georgian opposition, he conducted lengthy interviews with Asaval-Dasavali and Obieqtivi TV (the former's TV equivalent). He demanded that other members of his coalition do the same. For the record, Asaval-Dasavali is the newspaper that, shortly after the victory of the Georgian Dream,

announced that it would publish a list of gays living in Tbilisi, together with their addresses and telephone numbers, clearly inviting extremist groups to carry out pogroms.

Initially, the GD drew closer to the European center-left parties to join the Party of European Socialists (PES) and counter the EPP (European People's Party) friends of the UNM. This, however, did not prevent them from making [xenophobic](#) (alluding that Georgia's former president Saakashvili was an ethnic Armenian) and homophobic (one of the GD candidates swore that he would never enter the Radisson Blue hotel in Tbilisi as the color blue was a gay symbol) statements. The GD did not refrain from establishing contact with Marine Le Pen's party in France or with various other radical right-wing movements in Europe. Thus, ideological consistency was never the GD's strong point.

The GD's links with the European Left seemed solid against the background of Eastern European and Balkan socialist parties, whose socialist credentials raised more doubts than the Georgian Dream. However, very soon after joining the PES, the GD came under criticism from the socialist political family. Resolutions critical of the Georgian regime adopted by the European Parliament began to be supported by the members of the socialist group, with only the far-right and far-left (GUE) abstaining or voting against. Despite this, the GD remained a member of the PES for as long as it could until it was expelled in 2023: the final straw was Prime Minister Gharibashvili's highly conspiratorial and homophobic [speech](#) at the Conservative Political Action Congress in Budapest, organized by Viktor Orbán.

Lincoln Mitchell, a Democrat and once GD lobbyist in the US has [qualified](#) this speech and the GD's recent evolution as fascist. In the GD's official statement explaining the party's leaving the PES (the PES presidency in June 2023 unanimously voted in favor of the exclusion), Party Chairman Irakli

Kobakhidze [announced](#) that “European socialists moved away from social-democratic values and adopted pseudo-liberalism.” Shortly before this, in October 2022, Kobakhidze proudly posted [selfies](#) with the “social traitor,” Olaf Scholz, and a few other socialist leaders at the PES Berlin congress in October 2022.

Ethnic and Nativist Definition of the Nation

The GD has demonstrated on numerous occasions that it is unable or unwilling to embrace the civic definition of the nation. The inclusive definition of a nation is a relatively recent notion in Georgia, as the Soviet and imperial eras shaped and taught the ethnic definition of nationality. This was also a consequence of the absence of a Georgian nation-state, which could have shaped the civic perception of nationhood over time. Even after independence, during the first decades, Georgian society failed to overcome the ethnic and exclusive definition of the nation: only those who were ethnically Georgian and religiously Orthodox were considered Georgians.

The Saakashvili government was the first to break with this tradition and promote a civic definition of the nation, manifested in loyalty to the Georgian state.

The Saakashvili government was the first to break with this tradition and promote a civic definition of the nation, manifested in loyalty to the Georgian state. In this way, the oft-emphasized difference between citizenship and nationality was gradually erased. To this end, the mention of ethnicity in identity documents was abolished, as were ethnic censuses of the population. It was strongly encouraged and applauded if a person of Armenian or Azerbaijani origin claimed to be simply Geor-

gian rather than just a citizen of Georgia. However, ethno-nationalist circles never accepted these reforms and accused the previous government of wanting to “abolish the Georgian nation.”

The modernists, like Saakashvili, were, in fact, no less nationalistic than the non-nationalists, but placed the reasons for national pride in different things: the successes of the state, its new bureaucracy, and its army were more highly valued. The GD gradually reverted to the ethnic definition, not officially, but de facto. For example, in 2021, during tensions between two religious communities in a village in Guria, majority MP Nino Tsilosani [declared](#) that “Muslim persons and Georgians have no reasons to fight.” In this particular case, the Muslims of the village were also ethnic Georgian, but apparently, that was not enough for the MP.

At every non-Orthodox religious holiday (such as Kurban Bayram/Aid-El-Adha, the feast of the breaking of Ramadan, Armenian Easter, etc.) or traditional minority holiday (Nowruz), GD leaders congratulate “our Muslim/Azerbaijani/Armenian/Jewish brothers” without ever stressing that they are Georgians too. The ministers assume they represent the “Orthodox Georgians,” so no one has heard them congratulating “our Orthodox brothers.” On the occasion of Orthodox Easter or Christmas, it is customary to congratulate the whole country. In contrast, the previous government made Nowruz a national holiday in Georgia.

All Georgians, regardless of their political sympathies, are proud of some particular features of their culture, such as Georgian polyphonies, Georgian medieval poetry, folkloric dances, some of the beautiful historical monuments, mainly churches, and cathedrals, Georgian cuisine or Georgian wine, and the unique Georgian language, but not everyone, especially in the GD leadership, understands the importance of having a national state.

Notably, Georgian culture, songs, and cuisine were

also appreciated by the occupant/colonial power. Many Russians found Georgia and Georgians picturesque, liked to spend holidays drinking Georgian wine and chacha, and considered Georgians as joyful singers and dancers. However, very few, if any, Russians or Soviets considered Georgia worth having an independent state.

Georgians always had the choice to conform to the occupant's stereotype and even find it to their advantage. Many Georgians did it during the Tsarist or Soviet times and had successful careers and comfortable lives. They even considered that they were patriots of their country, an imperial province, and this circumstance never caused them any particular concern. The GD continues this tendency. Georgia's Minister of Culture, Tea Tsulukiani, once claimed that having Georgian religious songs performed in the Sistine Chapel in Rome was no less critical than Georgia's accession to the EU.

Georgian Traditions

The GD claims that Georgian traditions are in danger, and safeguarding them is a primary challenge.

The GD claims that Georgian traditions are in danger, and safeguarding them is a primary challenge. Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to define these traditions and how they are specifically Georgian, the GD actively promotes the idea that the main threat comes from the Western world and its decadence; the risks of contagion would mainly threaten the traditional family. Ivanishvili himself has repeatedly made his views on parenting public, including the need for breastfeeding. In 2019, he [declared](#) that infants should be raised by their mothers and that the destruction of the institution of "motherhood" was the source of many ills. Ivanishvili even proclaimed that he would solve this problem once he left political life.

The Russian narrative about the supposed disappearance in the West of the family of "daddy-mommy" in favor of "parent 1-parent 2" is widely relayed by GD propaganda. In 2014, one year to the day of the violent pogrom of the LGBT protest, the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church introduced "Family Purity Day." For the past ten years, on 17 May, which is also the World Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, this Church initiative has been joined by virtually all GD media personalities and their families. In 2024, Prime Minister Kobakhidze made this day a public holiday.

Over the past two to three years, as the GD's popularity crisis has deepened, this rhetoric has grown considerably stronger and reached new heights. Prime Minister Gharibashvili, for example, [embraced](#) the theme of the liberal forces' desire to "legalize sex reassignment for children without their families' consent." In the same vein, since 2014, the GD has been campaigning to include the definition of marriage in the country's constitution. In 2017, Irakli Kobakhidze, then Chairman of the Parliament, [introduced](#) the project to amend the constitution and include the definition of marriage as a unity between a man and a woman.

In addition to "defending the family," the GD capitalizes on other Georgian traditions such as the *supra* and toast making. The *supra*, or the Georgian art of feasting, considered by the younger generation to be a little old-fashioned with the phenomena of the *tamada* (chief toast-maker or Master of Ceremonies) and toasts with a predefined succession, has been used as a national symbol in political PR. Ivanishvili himself [delivered](#) a veritable ode to the Georgian *supra* in 2014: "And here comes the *tamada*, your psychoanalyst... I can't say that I discovered the Georgian *supra*. What I did was discover and catch its uniqueness. I'm using this in management."

Orthodox Christian Religion

The Georgian Orthodox Church is a primary vehicle for conservatism in the country, and unlike the GD, its attitude is long-standing and constant. Here, it is not a question of studying the Church's positions and their evolution, or even its infiltration by Russian narratives, but of the GD's efforts to defend religion and benefit from the Church's support in return. The Georgian Orthodox Church is usually very loyal to the ruling party for two reasons. Firstly, this is its constant trait because it is accustomed to being faithful to political regimes. This loyalty obtains necessary concessions and benefits such as material wealth, land, forests, public funding, and numerous tax exemptions on economic activities. Secondly, the Church is particularly keen on supporting the GD since the ruling party appears immune to any modernist or liberal ideology, unlike the opposition.

The open support of numerous priests and church hierarchs at Sunday masses played a significant role in the GD's victory in 2012. At the time, and despite the many gifts that President Saakashvili had made to the Church, it was unhappy with the law passed by the Saakashvili government conferring legal personality also on non-Orthodox religions, which gave them legal weapons to reclaim their property, often illegally captured by the Orthodox Church. The Georgian Orthodox Church disapproved of the previous government's pro-Western and anti-Russian policies.

The GD and the government know the importance of the Church's support, so the government is particularly generous towards it during election years.

The GD and the government know the importance of the Church's support, so the government is particularly generous towards it during election years. Many of the GD's legislative initiatives are

designed to satisfy the Church and political leaders, including Ivanishvili, who is widely portrayed as not being much of a Christian who regularly appears on their knees before the Patriarch, especially during the major religious holidays. One should not forget that one of the first primary parliamentary debates after the GD's victory to please the Patriarchate was about the [ban](#) of specific condoms, which were "supposed to give pleasure during intercourse."

During the COVID period, for example, the government's severe restrictions on meetings in Orthodox churches were relaxed and sometimes even non-existent. While mosques and synagogues were closed, churches continued to be open, and the Minister of Health, Ekaterine Tikaradze, refused to say whether or not the virus was transmitted inside churches or through the collective consumption of mass wine... "There is no scientific study showing the evidence that the virus can be transmitted through the spoon used during communion," Tikaradze [declared](#).

Prime Minister Gharibashvili made the most effort in this direction. He set the example of a good family man with four children and a discreet, self-effacing wife who wore a scarf on her head during religious holidays. Gharibashvili seemed unaware that Georgia was constitutionally a secular state as he repeatedly asserted that Georgia was an Orthodox one. Most Georgian people may be Orthodox Christians, but according to the constitution, the state is secular, and no religion has a state status. The Prime Minister took such delight in the role of a priest that, during the feast of Svetitskhloba in 2022, he [addressed](#) the population from the top of the cathedral, which in the liturgy is strictly reserved for ecclesiastic persons.

Numerous other signs of the gradual erosion of the secular nature of the state are present under the GD's rule, and they appear with redoubled force when the government encounters difficulties in

other areas. For example, in June 2022, when the EU gave candidate status to Kyiv and Chisinau and was content to grant only the European perspective to Georgia because of the government's anti-European policies, Gharibashvili tried to divert the attention of the highly disgruntled public by announcing that Georgia had [obtained](#) a plot of land on the banks of the Jordan River "on the very spot where Lord Jesus strolled 2,000 years ago" and where a religious complex for Georgian pilgrims and a baptistery would be built. The PM's communication suggested that the importance of obtaining such a privilege in the Holy Land was beyond the timeframe of European integration.

During another crisis, in July 2021, when violent religious extremist groups organized a pogrom against civil society activists and journalists and illegally erected a metallic cross in front of the Georgian Parliament while burning EU flags, the Speaker of the Parliament from the GD, Archil Talakvadze, *summoned* the journalists who asked if the cross planted by the extremists was going to remain: "Are you tense at the sight of an Orthodox cross?" – was the pushback from the Chairman.

However, aligned interests do not always mean aligned identities, let alone the submission of the Church. In fact, unlike Russia, where the Patriarchate appears as a spiritual or propaganda subdivision of political power, the Georgian Patriarchate has more independence from the GD. It is engaged with it in a transactional relationship. It is give and take. Power wields money and other gifts, sometimes even threats, as recently [revealed](#) by the leakage of intelligence sources, which contained hundreds of documents on the juicy details of the private lives of numerous church representatives.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has its social re-lays and a very dense territorial network, independent of the state administration controlled by the GD. It also has its own links and communication channels with Russia. These assets enable the

Church to be on an equal footing with the GD. For example, the Georgian Orthodox Church recently refused Ivanishvili's offer to revise the constitution and make Orthodoxy the state religion. In this pre-electoral maneuver by the GD, the Patriarchate saw the danger of the Church being subjugated to the political power, and the proposal was [rejected](#).

Attitude towards Minorities

Another issue of national importance for the GD is the topic of minorities. Like any populist political force, the Georgian ruling party has understood that pitting the majority against the minority is politically winning: claiming to defend Orthodox Christians, who make up 80% of the population, against minority cults, or the heterosexual majority against the LGBT minority, can win elections.

Thus, one of the first targets after the GD's electoral victory in 2012 was religious minorities, especially Muslims, the country's second-largest religious community, representing almost 11% of the population. Immediately after the GD came to power, Christian extremist groups, or the followers of certain clergy with radical views, attacked the prayer houses, madrassas, or mosques of their neighbors: incidents broke out simultaneously in several regions of the country: in Guria, Kakheti, and Samtskhe. The state's attitude in each case was highly passive, out of concern not to upset the xenophobic Christian faithful, who were also their supporters and voters.

The example of the village of Tjela in the Adigeni district was the most emblematic: in 2013, the village's Christian population, at the instigation of priests, attacked Muslims who were attempting to erect a minaret at their prayer house legally. The police dismantled the minaret at the request of the Christians, and the authorities *de facto* sided against the Muslims. A trick was even found to prevent the minaret from being erected: the customs authorities concluded that the minaret's

metal roof, imported from Türkiye, had not been adequately cleared through customs. The state as a whole: local authorities, the police, and the Ministry of Finance (which runs the customs) had become [involved](#) in a communitarian action against a minority.

And then there is homophobia, the GD's best ally. Since October 2012, homophobic hate groups committed numerous attacks against the LGBT community. Homophobia was not born with the GD, but since it acceded to power, the state has been highly reserved in preventing violence against sexual minorities. The *pogrom* of 17 May 2013, when several thousand radicals chased dozens of activists gathered in solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community through the streets of Tbilisi under the complicit eye of the authorities, is the best illustration of the phenomena.

In July 2021, Orthodox extremists and fundamentalists took Prime Minister Gharibashvili's speech, which [stated](#) that "the minority cannot impose its views on the majority and that the government must act in the interests of the majority" as the government's green light, and organized attacks against the organizers of Tbilisi Pride, as well as civil society organizations and journalists. As a result of the violence, a television cameraman died. Despite a direct call to violence from an Orthodox Proterius, Spiridon Tskipurishvili, who [declared](#) in front of the rally: "We are told 'no to violence,' but you have a duty to violence, you must commit violence for the homeland, for God, for purity!," the PM [justified](#) the failure to protect demonstrators from religious extremists by asserting: "We, as the government elected by the majority of the people must take into account what the majority wants, and the absolute majority of the population is against this march or propaganda parade. We will always take this into account. It won't be as before when the minority decided the fate of the majority."

This primitive conception of democracy, the rock bottom of political thought, characterizes Gharibashvili's innermost reflection, for he repeated it on several occasions, notably in his infamous Budapest [speech](#): "We will not accept violence by the minority against the majority. We will not support attempts by a minority to use aggressive propaganda to change the values that the majority of our population consider to be established by God, the values on which the identity and entire history of the Georgian people are based". In another vein, the same Gharibashvili considered it an aberration that in local elections, certain towns could be won by the opposition because, at the national level, his party had the majority. [According](#) to his ingenious thinking, if a locality chose an opposition mayor, its population would go against the nation.

Attitude to the Soviet Past

While Georgian reformers and modernists view the Soviet past critically as a particularly dark moment akin to foreign occupation, the GD revives Soviet nostalgia by portraying it positively. Ivanishvili, the man who has undoubtedly profited most from the end of the communist system, having become a billionaire himself, maintains this harmonious vision of the Soviet past. The oligarch even [declared](#) in an interview that "the opening of borders was a great misfortune for us. Everyone can go outside and see how others live, which has deepened our misery... I had a happy childhood because we all lived the same way."

It is even more comical that the mayor of Tbilisi, former AC Milan professional footballer, famous fashion 'victim,' and multi-millionaire Kakha Kaladze, is [promising](#) the people of Tbilisi to make one of the capital's parks as beautiful as it was in Soviet times.

If the idea of independence and national sovereignty were really valuable to the Georgian Dream,

it would not contribute to the rehabilitation of Stalin, who occupies a paradoxical place in the consciousness of Georgians: tyrant of the occupying empire who contributed to the invasion of Georgia in 1921, the mastermind of the Great Terror that annihilated the lives of tens of thousands of Georgians, a national renegade par excellence, he was nevertheless adulated by some Georgians as the country's most famous native historical figure.

This phenomenon was on the wane with the generational turnover, and the UNM government finally dismantled the massive statue of the great leader in front of its museum in his hometown of Gori, transforming it into a museum of Stalinism rather than a museum to the glory of Stalin. In 2011, the same government introduced a law [banning](#) the public display of symbols of the totalitarian communist regime. With the arrival in power of the Georgian Dream, the narrative of Stalin - a great, wise, and exceptional leader - is making a solid comeback. This is illustrated, for example, by the [appearance](#) here and there of statues of him, some of them erected by the decisions of GD-dominated town councils.

This phenomenon can be explained both by the GD's attempt to appeal to the older population, given that according to all the polls, it is the over-60s who vote most for this party, but also by the resurgence of neo-imperial propaganda and Russian and Putin soft power for which the Stalinist myth is an essential component. Here, the elective affinities between the interests of the Georgian regime and those of the Kremlin could not be more precise.

In the tabloid press and on popular TV programs, the version that Stalin was a crypto-patriot and Orthodox believer is multiplying.

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the version that Stalin was a crypto-patriot and Orthodox believer is multiplying. In January 2004, an icon of Stalin appeared in the main cathedral of the Georgian capital (the leader of the Communist Party was depicted alongside Saint Matrona of Moscow) but had to be [removed](#) after protests from civil society organizations and despite attempts by the Orthodox Patriarchate to justify its existence.

In recent years, the positive narratives of other communist leaders, such as Vasil Mzhavanadze (head of the Georgian Communist Party from 1953 to 1972), have also multiplied, romanticizing his years of government marked by the triumph of the "Georgian spirit," namely the flourishing of corruption, the parallel economy, and gageba - a Georgian form of the Russian concept of *ponyatye*, literally 'understanding' - a non-written set of rules of behavior not always be written and enforced the law. Interestingly, these narratives are ahistorical, as the same people convey positive myths about Stalin and Mzhavanadze. Yet, Mr. Mzhavanadze is primarily associated with implementing the de-Stalinization policy in Georgia, as decided at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The GD's positive attitude towards the Soviet past has also attracted the loyalty of two additional segments of society. Neither of these segments supports the regime of the GD by pure ideology because the pragmatic/financial component of this support is insignificant. These groups are the former Soviet *intelligentsia* and the former *nomenklatura*. Although the Soviet Union claimed to be a classless society, these two groups were the real ruling class together, even according to Marxist analysis. More than that, these groups also dominated symbolically, culturally, and socially in alliance. They sealed matrimonial alliances, lived in the same urban areas, and were conscious of belonging to a true elite.

The period of the Saakashvili government was difficult for Soviet high society. The former president wanted to promote a new elite based on meritocracy and upward mobility and had once explicitly called for these old elites to be [flushed down](#).

Ivanishvili rehabilitated these groups, supported them financially throughout the years, and praised them as the soul of the Georgian people. Despite not being from this caste himself and having very modest origins, the oligarch was nevertheless able to detect a significant social force in them. In return, Ivanishvili has certainly never had as many explicit and vocal admirers as he does among the representatives of the Soviet *intelligentsia*: actors, singers, and artists of all kinds.

Criminal Subculture

Georgia has long been known as a society with a strong tradition of lawlessness and a cult of the illicit. Certainly, a product of the colonial subject's past, the law has long been regarded as something alien from outside, in this case, from the Tsarist or Soviet imperial center. As a result, its circumvention and valorization of it has a long and well-established history. The country's oral traditions are full of tales of the symbolic and romantic figure of the social bandit, later replaced by a 'thief-in-law.'

To this cultural substratum are added certain images of traditional masculinity in which the man has a certain number of obligations or roles to assume, a sort of code of honor to respect: physical commitment in the face of adversity, discomfort with certain activities, such as services or trade, or work in general, the ability to endure excessive alcohol consumption, protection of the honor of female family members and, last but not least, an ability to break, circumvent or find "arrangements" outside the scope of the law. Many Georgians remember a TV show at the beginning of the 2000s, where a famous Georgian female film director, a representative of a lineage of members of

Soviet *intelligentsia*, exclaimed that, as a woman, she couldn't admire a Georgian man who abides by the law: "A Georgian man always broke the law, and he will survive only by breaking the law!"

The "thieves-in-law" phenomenon developed on this favorable substrate, initially a product of the Soviet prison system. Still, from the 1960s onwards, it found a meteoric rise in Georgia and among Georgians. These "thieves-in-law" represented a caste in the criminal world, also known as "criminal authorities." They made their living mainly from racketeering but also by dispensing parallel justice, collecting debts, and solving many problems where the official justice system was ineffective.

Towards the end of the Soviet era, over two-thirds of the several hundred "thieves-in-law" in the whole former USSR area were Georgians.

The "success" of this phenomenon in Georgia was impressive: towards the end of the Soviet era, over two-thirds of the several hundred "thieves-in-law" in the whole former USSR area were Georgians. Their popularity was accompanied by mythology and prestige, which attracted many young men to embrace this career. The criminal subculture had colonized even the school benches, as becoming a "thief" was every boy's dream and every girl's admiration. It was not uncommon for teenagers to collect money for imprisoned 'thieves-in-law.' The best-known thieves were respected by society, including the Soviet *intelligentsia*, who wrote songs, literature, and films about their lives, further romanticizing their characters.

The 'thieves,' being a Soviet phenomenon, were against the break-up of the USSR. Indeed, most Georgian 'thieves' worked in various parts of the Soviet Empire, rarely returning to visit their homeland. However, the collapse of the USSR

brought them economic wealth as they proved better equipped than other social groups to grab the economic cake as it was being distributed. The ‘thieves’ continued to influence Georgia’s social and political life in the 1990s but ran up against the political force that had come to power after the 2003 Rose Revolution.

The Saakashvili team of reformers worked hard to eliminate the phenomenon from Georgian reality. In a relatively short time, the police and judiciary declared a relentless war on the criminal authorities, and almost all the ‘thieves-in-law’ were either arrested or kicked out abroad, including to Western Europe.

The Saakashvili team of reformers worked hard to eliminate the phenomenon from Georgian reality. In a relatively short time, the police and judiciary declared a relentless war on the criminal authorities, and almost all the ‘thieves-in-law’ were either arrested or kicked out abroad, including to Western Europe. The very fact of belonging to the group, without proof of any crime committed, became sufficient to bring the members of this community to justice. Their properties were confiscated, and, as a final humiliation, police stations were opened in their former villas.

No less effort was made on the mentality front, particularly with regard to the younger generations. It was necessary to de-mystify and de-romanticize the phenomenon, to show the much less glamorous or “noble” realities of these individuals’ lives.

Many Georgians were satisfied with the phenomenon’s decline or its virtual disappearance, even though they considered the ‘thieves’ invincible only

a short time earlier. However, a sizeable segment of Georgian society found the government’s policy too repressive as a certain degree of criminality in society seemed acceptable, almost a local cultural trait.

In this segment, the GD worked hard, propagating incessantly about the previous government’s repressive penal policy. In its 12 years in power, the GD has done nothing but denounce and propagate the myth of the inhuman nature of the previous regime, which arrested indiscriminately and consciously mistreated the “finest Georgian youth” to make them docile and obedient. Any abuses committed in the prison administrations (and, of course, there were some) were highly publicized and used against the UNM government to demonstrate its inhuman and anti-Georgian character. The prisoner rape scandal in one of the capital’s prisons, which broke just a few days before the October 2012 elections, cost the UNM its victory.

This crime, allegedly committed by the prison hacks, was seen as the ultimate humiliation of ‘Georgianness’ for GD propaganda, and such reading resonated well with society. The criminal world wanted the GD to win in 2012, as illustrated by the numerous leaks organized by the law enforcement bodies at the time. One of the GD’s leaders, the current mayor of Tbilisi, [spoke](#) with eight “thieves-in-law” who had come to wish him good luck in the 2012 elections.

The pressure on the criminal world eased when the GD came to power. The prisons had loudly celebrated the victory of Bidzina, who was called “their uncle.” Many inmates left the prisons, and their relationship with political power returned to the pre-Saakashvili era. The “thieves-in-law” mentality has undergone rehabilitation, even if the blow between 2004 and 2012 proved challenging to reverse. In the criminal or para-criminal world, all devotees of the *kai bitchi* ethos, or the Georgian equivalent of “good fellas,” have an absolute

hatred for those who ruled under Saakashvili and have actively supported the GD in every election since 2012.

Reduced sentences, amnesties, tolerance of illicit activities, and inclusion in methadone programs for drug addicts are all instruments the government party has at its disposal to attract the loyalty of this segment of society.

The GD is undoubtedly a more Georgian political party for the criminal underworld than the liberal and modernist opposition parties. Therefore, their rehabilitation and electoral exploitation is a conscious policy of the government party. Reduced sentences, amnesties, tolerance of illicit activities, and inclusion in methadone programs for drug addicts are all instruments the government party has at its disposal to attract the loyalty of this segment of society. On the ideological level, while the leaders of the government party denounce the dangers of liberalism, no member of the ruling circles has spoken of the threat that the mentality and ideology of “thieves-in-law” could represent.

A Trio to Count On

The Georgian Dream’s ideological evolution from social populism to nativist ethnonationalism reflects a troubling trend in global populism: the shift from economic promises to identity-based fearmongering.

The Georgian Dream’s ideological evolution from social populism to nativist ethnonationalism reflects a troubling trend in global populism: the shift from economic promises to identity-based fearmongering. Initially, the GD garnered widespread support with ambitious socio-economic pledges, which, when unfulfilled, left a void filled

by an aggressive turn toward ethnonationalism and cultural conservatism. This pivot is emblematic of a broader phenomenon where populist movements, faced with the limits of economic populism, turn to the politics of identity, exploiting fears of cultural erosion and external threats.

The GD’s embrace of Soviet nostalgia and the romanticization of Georgia’s criminal subculture serve as additional tools to appeal to older, more conservative voters, reinforcing an inward-looking narrative resistant to modernization. The party’s strategic targeting of minorities, coupled with its reverence for the past, underscores a move towards a more authoritarian and exclusionary form of governance, perpetuating injustice and division.

This transformation threatens Georgia’s democratic institutions, social cohesion, and aspirations for closer European integration. As the GD continues to reshape the political landscape by manipulating fear and nostalgia, it will inevitably steer the country away from its democratic path and towards a more isolated, authoritarian future under the Russian sphere of influence, leaving a trail of unease and caution in its wake.

In the October elections in each locality, the GD will rely on a trio of notables: (1) The outgoing majoritarian district deputy, now known as “delegates.” This is often a local millionaire, an entrepreneur seeking protection for his money, or someone who has clarified relations with the government, donates essential sums to the ruling party, and, in exchange, his companies win all public tenders in his region. As a rule, he (exclusively men) originates from the Soviet time, *nomenklatura*, or was a factory director or executive. (2) An ecclesiastical authority, a priest, preferably a bishop or archbishop, whose support is crucial, especially in rural areas. (3) A criminal authority or figures affiliated with the criminal world whose job is to intimidate the potentially pro-opposition electorate. At the national level, this trinity will be joined by represen-

tatives of the Soviet-era artistic *intelligentsia* and top athletes – preferably former Olympic champions, often from combat sports – illustrating masculinity and conservatism and bringing in their wake young athletes in search of recognition. The inclusion of athletes gives the advantage of being ready to use their muscles to crush anyone who gets in the way of the ruling party.

The presence of these emblematic figures signifies how the GD sees Georgian people, both past and present. The future of Georgia for the GD is pretty much the return to the late Soviet past with its

corruption and nepotism, plus the ethnic and religious nationalism of the 1990s. In this equation, the nation's lifeblood has no place and, in the best-case scenario, is called upon to emigrate. Ex-president Saakashvili once recounted the content of his conversation with Ivanishvili when the latter allegedly told him: "You're not happy with your people, you constantly want to change them, you think it's better. But people don't like to be changed. I take them as they are; I tell them I love them as they are and that they're great. I don't want to change them at all. That's the difference between us" ■

Front Républicain – An Idea for Georgia?

In the French legislative elections in July 2024, a massive mobilization of citizens across the left-right divide managed to bar the road to the government to the far-right Rassemblement National (RN). Even though the French have complained about its failure for decades, the “republican front” worked, just like 40 years ago in 1985, when it was first invoked.

The Gaullist centralized model of the French Fifth Republic was very appealing in many countries that emerged after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Georgia, too, has looked to France for political inspiration. But while the semi-presidential governance model and weak decentralization have fallen somewhat out of fashion, could the French experience of keeping the anti-democratic forces out of power be useful for Georgia?

Protecting from Whom?

The French political phenomenon of the “republican front” was born in a specific political context.

The term was coined by journalist Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber in 1955, during the French Fourth Republic, when the left, center-left, and center-right parties banded together in a coalition for the extraordinary legislative elections in 1956 and won a relative majority.

Even though the “Front” and the outgoing government led by Edgar Faure had many political disagreements (one of which was the election system – to which we return later), the banding of the disparate parties together was linked to the rise of the Union for the Defense of Tradesmen and Artisans (UDCA) led by Pierre Poujade. Incidentally, one of the youngest elected “Poujadist” members of the parliament was Jean-Marie Le Pen.

It is against Le Pen’s Front Nationale (FN) that the new “front républicain” became mobilized in the 1980s and this time, without the capital “F.” It encompassed not a political grouping or an electoral alliance, like its 1950s precursor, but a determination of the political forces across the spectrum



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to refuse any coalition with the extreme right and keep them out of governing arrangements at all levels.

Let us pause here briefly since the discussion about the transposition of the French experience would be impossible without clarifying the reason for France's peculiar dogged resistance to the far right-wing forces.

This resistance draws on a series of formative experiences in the French history of politics: the French Revolution (1789), the Dreyfus affair (1894-1906), and the experience of the Vichy government during the Nazi occupation. Each of these dramatic and traumatic upheavals positioned the extreme right wing of the French body politic against the mainstream of progressive change, whose eventual success resulted in the "pruning" (often violent) of the right wing of French politics. French political families have a strong sense of continuity and succession, drawing on the iconic (and much car-

icatured) heroes, villains, memories, and, importantly, sets of interlinked political ideas and values.

Poujadisme of the 1950s projected itself as a resistance of a "small working Frenchman" against an invasive state – the movement was sparked as a response to the introduction of obligatory taxation and fiscal controls. Yet, this "little white working Frenchman" movement had strong opinions about keeping control of Algeria and rallied against the government of the day with thinly veiled anti-Semitic flair. That was a throwback to the movement triggered by General Boulanger during the Dreyfus crisis almost a century earlier, which had a much more authoritarian political vision but was mobilizing a very similar social class under similar ideological banners.

It is not surprising that Jean-Marie Le Pen got his political spurs in this movement and rose to form the FN, which, in turn, triggered echoes with the Vichy government. After all, its co-founders have

cooperated closely with both France's ultra-conservative collaboration government under Nazi occupation as well as directly the Waffen SS.

In this way, despite many nuances and differences, Boulanger, Poujade, and the Le Pen family (father and daughter) are part of the same ideological and political continuum for the progressive French who try to prevent it from coming to power. They are part of the political stream that is literally "re-fouled"—marginalized and excluded.

Arguably, for the democratically-minded Georgians, there is perhaps only one truly "damned" political force – (ethnically) Georgian Bolsheviks who facilitated the Soviet-Russian invasion, which ended the Georgian Democratic Republic in 1921.

Georgia is a very young republic, especially as compared to France. Arguably, for the democratically-minded Georgians, there is perhaps only one truly "damned" political force – (ethnically) Georgian Bolsheviks who facilitated the Soviet-Russian invasion, which ended the Georgian Democratic Republic in 1921. For many Georgians, this creates an aversion to the left wing (which often encompasses both communists and socialists – much to the French surprise). But unlike Vichy, which only governed for four years, their Georgian cousins ruled for 70, assuring much deeper penetration into social strata and the latent continuity of political culture – however rejected.

In the modern second Georgian republic, the tactic of exclusion was practically implemented once, in late 1991, by the gangster-cum-politician, Jaba Ioseliani, who coined the political slogan "everyone minus one." As one of the leaders of the armed coup in progress, he pointed to the exclusion of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the deposed president, from

the political process. This traumatic episode of civil war in Georgia's history was only ostensibly fought on ideological grounds. Even though part of the opposition (perhaps rightly) accused Gamsakhurdia of anti-democratic tendencies, the regime immediately succeeding the coup was clearly anything but. The violent exclusion of Gamsakhurdia and his political supporters from the political process did, in fact, materialize. But that movement lacks modern-day heirs or a coherent ideology. The "everyone minus one" formula did stick, though, and was used both against Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili – but not practically implemented in the same way.

The ruling party stands accused of a "top-down coup" that goes beyond the state capture and is tantamount to breaching the constitutional provision that calls for Euro-Atlantic integration.

The current political moment in Georgia is, in many ways, unique. The ruling party stands accused of a "top-down coup" that goes beyond the state capture and is tantamount to breaching the constitutional provision that calls for Euro-Atlantic integration. Apart from the major shift in foreign policy – which has not been electorally or legally endorsed – the ruling party is also implementing an ideological shift towards far-right populism not only in its [foreign policy](#) and [campaign](#) but also in areas such as [education policy](#). This is the first time that the ruling party has articulated such a comprehensive far-right political platform, which stakes its hold on power on the bet that most citizens would support and endorse it.

Will the Georgians give right-wing populism a decisive rebuttal at the 26 October parliamentary elections and confine it to the margins of political life? We could look for an answer to this question in the French experience: yes, they are mobilizing against the far-right, but to protect what, exactly?

Protecting What?

The hint to the answer is contained, of course, in the identity and ideology of the movements against which the barrier is erected. Quite simply – the “republican front” is there to protect the Republic. To be more precise – to protect the liberal democracy based on republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity which express themselves in the post-war French formula of the “liberal and social democratic republic.” Different periods built different barriers against different counter-revolutionary vices. These barriers and taboos appeared slowly over the years, and even centuries, as a succession of events that echo and resonate with each other.

At the very outset of the French Revolution, the barrier was built against anti-revolutionary, aristocratic parties and royalist movements. They were repressed during the revolution, especially in post-revolutionary terror years. The more legitimate stream has been reduced to the minoritarian Orleanist right, which did not refuse the republic but favored a constitutional arrangement like that of the United Kingdom.

The Bonapartist period, even though drawing on and immediately succeeding the revolution, remains controversial. It gave birth to two right-wing political sub-streams: one is “strongman” Bonapartism – it is anti-republican and favors the dictatorial rule of the providential man. Another is ardently Republican, draped in the glory of the “French exceptionalism” and even particular “Republican messianism.”

To illustrate the first Bonapartist sub-stream, we can refer to an attempt by General Georges Boulanger in 1887-1889 to challenge an inefficient Third Republic and engineer, essentially, an electoral coup. He made an impressively credible attempt to bring the political extremes together

and rally the Bonapartist and royalist forces into a winning majority to overturn the republic. The barrage against “*Boulangisme*” meant – and still refers to – a republican unity against the appeal of providential strongmen.

The “law, order, and progress” Republican stream born out of Bonapartism is infused with a sense of French exceptionalism and a civilizing mission. It was present in French colonialism, carried over to Gaullism, and has retained its political legitimacy to this day because it is fundamentally committed to the republican legal order.

In more modern history, the long Dreyfus affair both boosted to its pinnacle and delegitimized the “land-and-blood” conservative nationalism, often with a small-bourgeois following and largely tinted with anti-Semitism. This is a period of the birth of the original French extreme-right thinking, with its “clubs,” pamphlets, and “leagues,” which created the political language (individualist, anti-systemic, anti-Semitic...) that alimentes France’s extremist political vocabulary to this day. The modern expression of this radical stream was found in the 1934 riots incited by “[L’Action française](#)” – a nationalist royalist paper – against the dysfunctional and corrupt (but undoubtedly liberal and democratic) Third Republic. The first “Popular Front” was created in response to these riots – an exclusively left-wing republican coalition that won the majority in the parliamentary elections in 1936.

The most dramatic experience in terms of understanding the role and the will for the exclusion of the extreme right came immediately afterward following the military collapse and capitulation of the French Army against the advancing Nazi troops in 1940. The appointment of the Marechal Philippe Pétain to head the government in June and conferring him extraordinary powers in July 1940 ended the French Republic. It must be said that the Vichy Government, as it became known, was not of extreme right ideology from the outset. If anything,

Pétain's rise to power had strong echoes of Boulangisme and its adulation for strongmen. It was also profoundly traditionalist. But Vichy gradually but firmly embraced the xenophobic and anti-Semitic policies of the Third Reich and gave prominence to the far-right elements. The "French State" under Vichy, as opposed to "Free France" championed by the exiled leadership of General de Gaulle, drew the political dividing line that persists to this day.

The Vichy is the antithesis of the French republican aspiration. It unites all far-right markers: it abolished the republic, was authoritarian, collaborated with the enemy, and was against the universal equality of human beings both in rhetoric and in policy – especially its virulent anti-Semitism and collaboration in the Shoah.

We can thus understand the modern iteration of the "republican front" as citizens' active denial of Vichyism to any force that presents its distinctive characteristics or advocates any of its policies. In this sense, the "republican front" is thus much wider than the Popular Front, which is a left-wing political project based on the fundamental values of the "republican front" but aims at mobilizing militant action for a more redistributive and social state.

Where do Georgians stand? The [polls suggest](#) that democracy is now considered the "best form of government" – 67% thought so in 2024 against only 10% who said other forms may be better in some circumstances. These figures stood at 49% and 20%, respectively, in 2019, indicating growing confidence against the background of evident state capture. A total of 42% [said](#) Georgia was a democracy now, a share that has also been declining since 2019, according to the same poll.

However, belief in democracy as a form of government only partially encompasses the republican ideals. The markers of xenophobic, homophobic,

and traditionalist policies remain simultaneously high, which gives right-wing populism considerable appeal and an electoral base in Georgia.

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The biggest political sin of the Vichy in France was, of course, collaboration with the occupying enemy. The Georgian opposition accuses the ruling party, the Georgian Dream, if not of collaborating with Russia directly but, at the very least, of letting the fear of Russia substantially alter Georgia's foreign policy. Pétain (whose military credentials, in contrast to the current Georgian leaders, were uncontested) also pointed to the inevitability of submitting to the overwhelming force and the common sense of waiting for better days.

Georgians have hit the streets in tens, perhaps even hundreds of thousands in 2023 and 2024, to say that they see a direct link between the rolling up of democracy at home, submitting to Russia's *diktat*, and the loss of the European perspective for their country. Only the October 2024 elections will show whether Georgian voters can vote strategically as the "republican front" – protecting their right to live in a free, democratic, and European republic.

This raises the question of electoral tactics and math, which have been critical to keeping the French far-right from power until now.

Protecting How?

The "republican front" may be a political instinct and a tradition, but it is a political practice of tactical voting. In the most striking manifestation, the tactical voting carried Jacques Chirac to vic-

tory in the second round of the presidential polls against Marine Le Pen with an unprecedented 82% of votes in 2002. In the case of presidential elections through universal suffrage, this tactic is simple – go to vote and vote for anyone but the FN/RN candidate.

Things get more nuanced in the parliamentary polls. The early elections of 2024 were the first and, so far, the only case when the far-right Rassemblement National had the chance of securing the majority and governing the country. That the RN failed to do so, despite collecting a similar number of votes as in the first round of the polls, is mainly due to the specificities of the electoral system.

In France, elections are held in 577 precincts on uninominal lists through a majoritarian, two-round system. The election rules stipulate that all candidates garnering at least 12.5% of the total votes listed in the precinct can present themselves in the second round. In 2024, an unprecedented 501 out of 577 mandates went into the second round. From those in 89 precincts, three candidates qualified, and in two – four.

The “republican front” expressed itself in two ways: firstly, 224 candidates who qualified for the second round withdrew from the race in favor of the best-placed opponent against the RN. And secondly, the voters have largely heeded the call from their favorite parties to vote for their political opponent just to bar the RN candidates from power. Combined with the surprising left-wing agreement about the “Popular Front,” this meant that instead of getting the keys to the Matignon palace, the seat of the French government, the RN only came third in the race.

Lessons for Georgia

Most obviously, the same electoral tactic on the parties’ side will not work in a fully proportional system. However, simple tactical voting – like in

the French presidential elections – may be used. This would require the significant political actors to decide on (and the voters to agree on) what “anti-republican” means in the Georgian context. Most straightforwardly, anti-constitutional policies may qualify as such. While the degree of “ownership” of the Constitution and the model it foresees is relatively low, the level of commitment to the European future seems to be considerable.

The French experience is unique in many ways, but it holds a lesson for Georgia and the international community that supports the development of sustainable democracy in the country.

It tells us that political polarization can be managed when there is an agreement on the fundamentals of the “republican” system of governance. Such a fundamental agreement can then be represented and channeled through the political system to ensure stability and sustainability. The French Fifth Republic’s constitution was drafted to avoid the dysfunctional governing coalitions of the Third and Fourth Republics and to secure the hold of the two major political strands (Socialist and Gaullist) on power. This was done through the voting system and, more importantly, through the party funding system, which bans significant private donations and makes state funding of the campaigns depend on previous electoral success – thus favoring the incumbents.

The rise of populism cannot be avoided entirely, especially in crises, but may be delayed, hoping that the political system will regain its stability before the extremes gain uncontested power.

Another lesson is that the rise of populism cannot be avoided entirely, especially in crises, but may be delayed, hoping that the political system will regain its stability before the extremes gain uncontested power.

France offers the more confrontational method of “barrage” based on traumatic historical experiences and a politically engaged electorate. States with proportional parliamentary systems, such as the Netherlands, suggest another model of “taming” the radicals through binding governing coalitions but this model requires a political culture rooted in consultation and compromise – something that is lacking in Georgia.

However, the overarching conclusion is that loyalty to the Republic is based on the ownership of

the constitutional system by the absolute majority of the citizenry. If Georgia manages to redress its political process and foreign policy course in October 2024, this may become a crucial task – to engage the constitutional process that would lead to the consensual founding of the new republic, the one bestowed with sufficient legitimacy to erect a barrier against all extreme forces that would be prone to subvert and abolish it ■

Shattered Dream: The Decline of Democracy and the Path to 2036

Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose wealth [amounts](#) to USD 4.9 billion - equivalent to 15% of Georgia's GDP - rose to power with his political party, the Georgian Dream (GD), in the autumn of 2012. After 12 years in office, the Georgian Dream seeks re-election in October 2024 for another four-year term, with Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [stating](#) that the party aims to remain in power until at least 2036.

In a [statement](#) issued on 20 August 2024, the Georgian Dream's political council outlined the reasons why it wants to not just stay in power but obtain a constitutional majority. The ruling party is seeking a constitutional majority in the upcoming parliamentary elections to achieve four key objectives: *eliminating and outlawing all opposition it labels as the "collective UNM," enacting anti-LGBT legislation to uphold "traditional values," preparing for potential constitutional changes in the event of Georgia's territorial reintegration, and protecting the country's national identity and values, whatever*

that might mean. The GD argues that a constitutional majority is essential to implement these measures, framing the election as a critical choice between "war and peace," "moral degradation and traditional values," and "sovereignty versus subservience to external forces."

Ivanishvili seems willing to sacrifice Georgia's Western integration, supported by most of the population, to maintain his grip on power.

An analysis of the past decade reveals that Ivanishvili's governance has been a zero-sum game from the outset, and the recent statement by the GD political council makes precisely that point. If the GD wins, everyone else will lose: political parties - the right to exist; individual politicians - freedom; minorities - their inherent rights; and Georgia - the prospect of European integration. Ivanishvili appears to understand that sharing or losing power equals losing control over everything - a prospect



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he finds unacceptable. Fearing political retribution from both opposition forces and possibly from Moscow - where he amassed his fortune - Ivanishvili seems willing to sacrifice Georgia's Western integration, supported by most of the population, to maintain his grip on power. The results of the October election will reveal whether or not Georgian society is prepared to accept this trade-off.

Phantom Reality

Bidzina Ivanishvili has long preferred to live in a self-imposed state of obscurity, especially until 2011, when he first revealed his carefully hidden political ambitions. His first major public appearance was in October 2011, when he [wrote](#) an open letter detailing his background, motivations, and reasons for entering politics. From the start, Ivanishvili argued that Georgian politics needed only two poles. He claimed he entered politics not for revenge against Saakashvili but out of a sense of duty to his homeland. However, his letter also hinted at a desire to control the media, tame journalists and experts who criticized him, and dispel accusations of being a Russian agent or a businessman who amassed wealth in Russia. When the Georgian Dream unveiled its program ahead of the 2012 general elections, it became clear that Ivanishvili might steer the country toward a shift in foreign policy. The document notoriously stressed that Georgia should no longer be a point of contention between the West and Russia.

In January 2013, during a visit to Armenia as Prime Minister, Ivanishvili [remarked](#) that Armenia - despite its close ties with Russia and membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) - was a role model for Georgia. Eight months later, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, under pressure from the Kremlin, opted out of signing an Association Agreement with the European Union and instead joined the Russian-led Eurasian Union. Commenting on this, Ivanishvili did not dismiss the possibility of Georgia also joining the Eurasian

Union, [stating](#): "If, in perspective, we see that it is interesting for the strategy of our country, then why not?..."

Furthermore, it emerged that the Georgian authorities had consulted with their Russian counterparts on whether or not to sign the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU. [According](#) to Zurab Abashidze, the Prime Minister's Special Representative in relations with Russia, Moscow confirmed that it did not oppose Georgia's signing of the agreement. Abashidze even claimed that informal dialogue with Russia played a role in securing the Association Agreement and visa liberalization with the EU.

To quell doubts about his links with Russia, Ivanishvili initially brought pro-Western politicians and parties into the Georgian Dream coalition, including the Free Democrats led by the then Defense Minister, Irakli Alasania, and the Republican Party headed by the then Parliamentary Chair, David Usupashvili. These inclusions now feel like window dressing to reassure the West that Georgia's Western orientation would remain intact. Over time, these politicians were forced out of the coalition, and Ivanishvili's inner circle gradually shrank to a group of loyalists and yes-men.

After 12 years in power, almost none of the original coalition members remains by his side. Instead, Ivanishvili now relies on those who worked for his private businesses, like Cartu Bank, and who are willing to follow his directives without question. This loyalty was evident when Parliament passed the Russian-style foreign agents law in 2024, with none of the Georgian Dream's members questioning the decision, even though it effectively halted Georgia's EU accession process.

The European Union also bears some responsibility for Georgian democracy's decline.

Signing the Association Agreement in 2014 and securing visa-free travel to the EU and the Schengen Zone countries in 2017 further solidified the deceitful perception that Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream were pro-Western. Georgia's democratic backsliding, in contrast to Ukraine and Moldova, allowed the country to be seen as a shining star within the EU's Eastern Partnership program. Thus, the European Union also bears some responsibility for Georgian democracy's decline. EU officials failed to recognize the early signs of democratic backsliding and instead praised the Georgian leadership for implementing reforms - reforms that were often only superficially enacted. Moreover, in 2023, the European Union granted Georgia the status of EU candidate state despite the blatant failure of the Georgian Dream to implement the 12 conditionalities. This credit, as we all saw, was grossly abused by the oligarch and his ruling party.

The Zero-Sum Game: Maintaining Power at All Costs

Ivanishvili's ruling methods reveal a pattern: when faced with a political crisis, he delivers empty promises to defuse protests and later reneges on them.

Ivanishvili's ruling methods reveal a pattern: when faced with a political crisis, he delivers empty promises to defuse protests and later reneges on them. After taking office, he pledged to fight elite corruption but instead turned the country into an oasis of corruption. In 2022, the Georgian Dream submitted an EU membership application to calm street protests, only to abandon the EU path later. Ivanishvili promised to "resolve all issues" within a year after the 2018 presidential elections but never attempted to follow up. The Georgian Dream signed the so-called "Charles Michel Agreement"

in 2021 to diffuse the post-parliamentary election crisis, only to withdraw from it later. Ivanishvili also promised to abolish the majoritarian system in 2020 to quell street protests but again reneged on his promise. In 2023, the Georgian Dream vowed not to pass the Russian-style foreign agents law, but a year later, they did nonetheless. It has taken years for much of Georgian society and the West to recognize that the words of Ivanishvili and his team have no value other than serving the political interests of the oligarch and the ruling party.

Tolerating, Not Fighting Elite Corruption

Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream coalition rose to power in 2012 on promises of restoring justice and combating corruption. In one of his early speeches, he vowed to fight elite corruption fiercely and hold even his closest allies accountable if they enriched themselves at the state's expense. Yet, despite these promises, the country gradually evolved into a captured state ruled by oligarchs. As Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2023 [stated](#): "High-level corruption is turning the government into a kleptocracy." Georgia's slide into corruption has become a significant obstacle to its EU integration. Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream have consistently tolerated high-level corruption, a fact made evident when the former reappointed Irakli Gharibashvili as Prime Minister in February 2021, despite his previous [ousting](#) over corruption allegations. However, Gharibashvili's second tenure lasted only until January 2024, as [accusations](#) of corruption again mounted against him.

Corruption is also deeply entrenched in the judiciary. In April 2023, the US Department of State [imposed travel bans](#) on three sitting and one former judge who had abused their positions within Georgia's High Council of Justice and were involved in significant corruption. At the time, Prime

Minister Gharibashvili [defended](#) the sanctioned judges, claiming that reforms under the Georgian Dream had turned the judiciary into a “model for the whole EU.” Despite pre-election promises, Ivanishvili and his team realized that maintaining and nurturing elite corruption and having a judiciary that serves their interests was the best way to consolidate power.

The European Union has [called](#) on the Georgian authorities to establish a system of extraordinary integrity checks for judicial candidates, with international experts playing a decisive role. However, the Georgian Dream immediately [rejected](#) this request, arguing that it would violate the Georgian Constitution. Ivanishvili [framed](#) the EU's demand as an attempt to “staff the judicial system with agents.”

Fear of Losing the Presidency

Another demonstration of Ivanishvili's reluctance to share power came during the 2018 presidential election when the Georgian Dream-backed candidate, Salome Zourabichvili, failed to win in the first round against the UNM candidate, Grigol Vashadze. After years of relative silence, Ivanishvili appeared on television, [urging](#) all Georgians to prevent the UNM from taking revenge and vote for Zourabichvili. He promised to correct all of the mistakes of the Georgian Dream within a year and ensure the country's irreversible development.

However, six years later, Georgian democracy has only deteriorated. According to the latest Press Freedom [Index](#), Georgia fell from the 61st place in 2018 to the 103rd. In the Corruption Perception [Index](#), Georgia dropped from 41st in 2018 to 53rd in 2023. The Democracy Index [prepared](#) by the Economist Intelligence Unit now classifies Georgia as a hybrid regime, with a democracy index score that declined from 5.5 in 2018 to 5.2 in 2023.

While democracy has regressed, Georgia's economy has grown in recent years. According to World Bank [data](#), the GDP per capita (PPP) nearly doubled from USD 4,804 in 2018 to USD 8,120 in 2023. However, due to endemic corruption, wealth distribution [remains](#) uneven, and the gap between the rich and the poor has widened. The number of people receiving subsistence allowances remains high at 12.7% of the total population. According to the Caucasus Barometer 2024, half of the country's population is [unemployed](#), and 45% want to [emigrate](#) temporarily. In contrast, at least 23 members of Parliament are [millionaires](#).

Fear of Losing Control Over Parliament

Since 2012, Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream have fully controlled the Georgian Parliament. The election system has played a significant role in this. The 2012-2020 Georgian Parliament comprised 150 members, of whom 77 were elected through proportional representation (party lists) and 73 through a majoritarian system. This mixed system consistently ensured a majority for the ruling party in Parliament. The majoritarian system was particularly [unfair](#) as it allowed a party to secure many more seats than the votes received. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream received 48.6% of the votes but secured 115 out of 150 seats, granting them a constitutional majority. The same happened in 2008 when the ruling UNM received 59% of the votes but secured 119 seats in Parliament – also a constitutional majority.

In June 2019, protests erupted after Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian Duma member, and supporter of Abkhazia's independence, sat in the chair reserved for the head of the Parliament and delivered a speech in Russian. To calm the tens of thousands of protesters gathered outside the Parliament building, Ivanishvili pledged to reform the electoral system, moving from a mixed 77/73 system to

full proportional representation with a zero-vote barrier. However, the proposed bill was blocked by majoritarian MPs, allegedly at Ivanishvili's behest, fearing that this reform would jeopardize the Georgian Dream's hold on power in the 2020 parliamentary elections. Instead, a compromise was reached in 2020, stipulating that 120 deputies would be elected through proportional representation and 30 from single-member constituencies. The transition to a fully proportional system was postponed until the 2024 general elections. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream received 48.2% of the votes but secured 90 seats in Parliament, once again thanks to the mixed system.

Russian Law: Another Broken Promise

Inspired by Russia's foreign agents law, the Georgian Dream attempted to pass a similar legislation in the spring of 2023. The ruling party saw this as an effective tool to stigmatize and silence critical voices in the media and civil society. Due to widespread protests and Western criticism, the Georgian Dream was forced to backtrack and halt the law's passage. At the time, Prime Minister Gharibashvili vowed not to revisit the draft law, [stating](#) that "the topic is over." However, the Georgian Dream resumed the legislative process and passed the law in the spring of 2024, just months before the general election. The law's passage, despite warnings from the West that it would end Georgia's EU accession process, demonstrated the Georgian Dream's willingness to trade off Georgia's EU aspirations to maintain power. On 26 October, the Georgian public will have the chance to decide whether or not they will accept this compromise.

The Way Ahead

Bidzina Ivanishvili has largely failed to deliver democratic and socio-economic reforms over the past 12 years. As the 2024 parliamentary elections approach, the Georgian Dream rhetorically positions itself as the only political force capable of maintaining peace with Russia and avoiding armed conflict. Playing on the trauma of the 2008 war, the Georgian Dream frames the 2024 election as a choice between peace and war, with the underlying message being peace versus EU integration. Ironically, while the Georgian Dream brands the West as a "[global war party](#)" pushing Georgia to open a second front against Russia, it simultaneously promises to secure Georgia's EU membership by 2030. This message is targeted at Georgian Dream supporters who believe that EU integration is not incompatible with passing Russian-style laws.

However, the message of war vs. peace appears to have changed recently. Now, the Georgian Dream is pushing for a strong authoritarian state with no opposition, no regard for Western values, and nobody to challenge Mr. Ivanishvili's whims and governance methods. This strategy of "all in" shrinks the possibility of influencing Georgian Dream's actions from outside, by Western partners, or inside, from the remaining few democratic institutions to the minimum. In such an environment, the legitimacy of the elections raises serious doubts. At the end of the elections, we will know whether the Georgian Dream secured enough support or snatched election results to achieve the autocratic rule it had announced or whether the Georgian people will punish the oligarch for banking on authoritarianism instead of Georgia's European future and prosperity ■

A Boat Race to Watch: Georgian Elections 2024

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

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

What makes these elections unique is that every opposition party must also root for others to clear the 5% threshold. Otherwise, GD might stay in power.

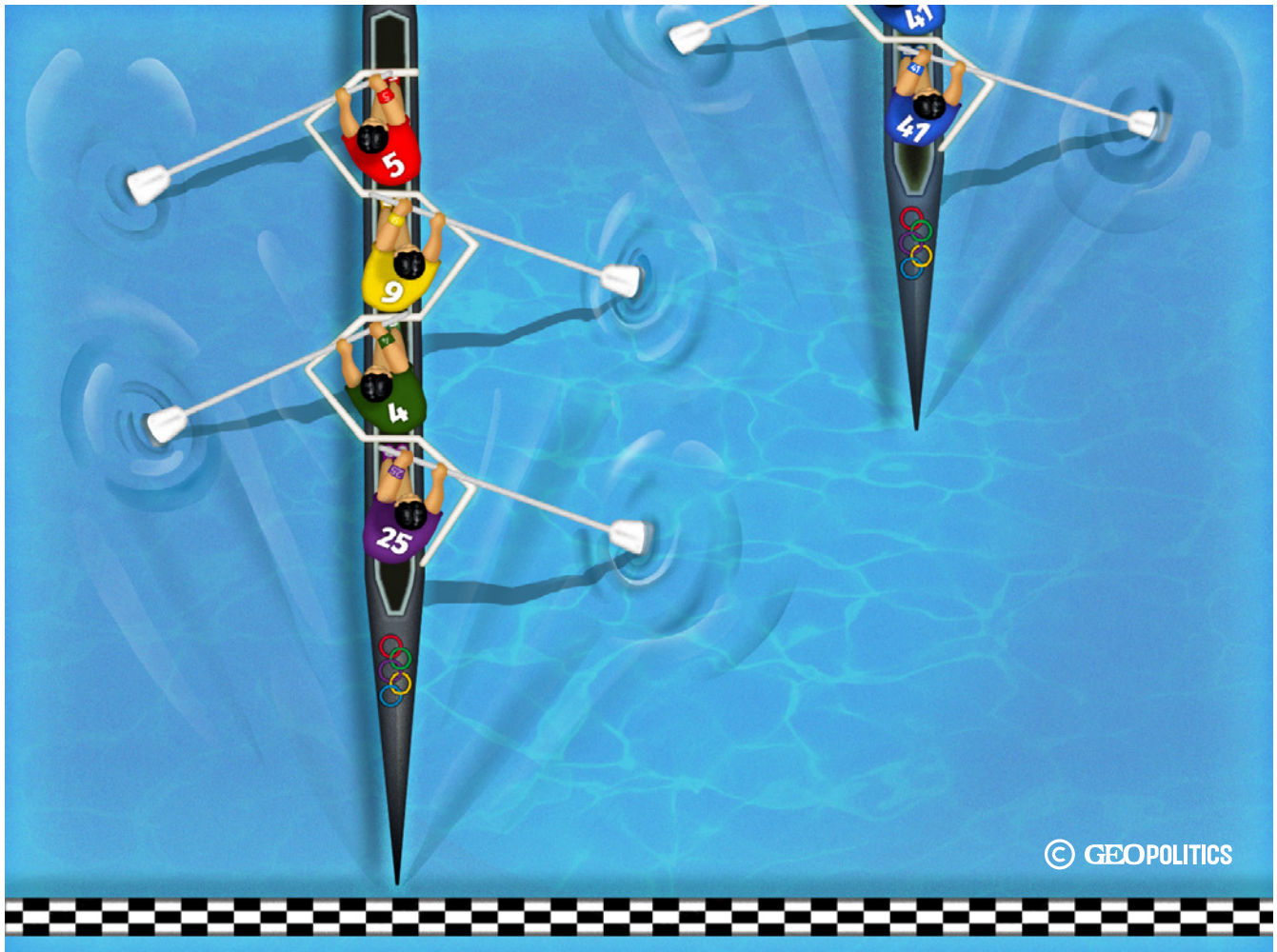
But the fate of the elections will be decided by parties number four, nine, and twenty-five. These are likely to be Coalition for Change (Ahali, Girchi-More Freedom, Droa, Republicans), Lelo (Anna Dolidze’s “For People” and Aleko Elisashvili’s Citizens”), and For Georgia of the former Prime Minister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

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



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Electoral Arithmetics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The decision of several hundred thousand Georgian emigres living outside the country might be vital for the outcome of the October elections.

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

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

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

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

Programs vs Leaders

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

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

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

The message from Ivanishvili is clear – he wants carte blanche from the country to strengthen his authoritarian rule.

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

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

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

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

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

Opportunities Missed

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

not have dominated the branding and party list.

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

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

The opposition parties have so far failed to formulate a comprehensible and easy-to-understand message box on the social and economic problems that the population faces.

Thirdly, the opposition parties have so far failed to formulate a comprehensible and easy-to-understand message box on the social and economic problems that the population faces. The 'Europe vs. Russia' campaign might be profoundly successful in urban areas, but citizens care about their households in smaller municipalities and rural areas. Awkward attempts by some opposition forces, like Lelo, to promise to increase pensions to 1,000 GEL (330 Euros) are usually met with mockery since the budgetary calculations do not withhold criticism when such a dramatic rise in expenditures is planned.

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

The opposition is yet to show its strength.

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

What to Watch Out for Before the Elections Day?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Watching the Wrong Game: How Digital Authoritarians Outpace Election Monitors

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

In the internet age, election manipulation is increasingly tied to sophisticated means of controlling societies, mainly through dominating information ecosystems and cyberspace.

However, in the internet age, election manipula-

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

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



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

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

State Control

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

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

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

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

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

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

Election Manipulation Combo

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

The State Security Service of Georgia has successfully translated the Georgian Dream's state capture into electoral success.

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

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

Information Ecosystem and Cyberspace

Alongside vote-buying, intimidation, and the misuse of administrative resources, the Georgian Dream party has effectively utilized polarization in the media environment as a critical tool to manipulate election outcomes.

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

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

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

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

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

The involvement of the Moscow-based IMA Digital highlights the deepening connection between the Georgian Dream and Russian interests, which is expected to intensify as the parliamentary elections approach.

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

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

Completing the Puzzle

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

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

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

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

Winning in 2024

To effectively counter the Georgian Dream's election manipulation in the upcoming October elections, it is essential to rethink and extend the scope, mandate, and approach of election observation missions.

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

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

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

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

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

Official statements from political leaders and senior civil servants that include hate speech, stigmatization, or calls for violence against opponents must be registered as violations.

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

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

Back From the Future

The end of history, predicted by Francis Fukuyama right after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1992, portrayed a rosy future where “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” seemed irreversibly achieved. Advances of Saddam Hussein in Kuwait, the war in the Balkans, the war against terror, and all forms of local skirmishes were labeled as remaining aftershocks of previous global confrontation.

The West became excessively comfortable with the newly discovered “peaceful world.” It diverted previous fears, anxieties, and military budgets to more humane agendas like education, healthcare, climate change, etc. Even expeditionary warfare against all sorts of Islamic terrorist groups did not change the primary perception that large-scale conventional wars between massive land forces and countries were essentially over. All of the West’s adversaries after 1992 proved to be profoundly inferior vis-à-vis American or allied force military might.

Peace was assumed to be taken for granted; hence, so much re-focusing, re-orienting, and re-prioritizing led to an overwhelming negligence of policies focused on deterrence and solidifying peace through further strengthening security establishment and defense institutions, including military alliances. Only by inertia and by determined actions of what is referred to today as “old, cold warriors,” NATO was enlarged, providing a haven for tens of millions of inhabitants of central and eastern Europe, giving them a chance for a peaceful transition from the Soviet legacy to democracy and from a planned economy to prosperity.

Confident in its military, technological, economic, and moral superiority, mesmerized by the prospects of globalization, the West started to ignore warning signs of rising challenges. This was unsurprising, as the whole generation of diplomats, military leaders, development professionals, and business champions made their careers based on the abovementioned auspicious assumptions, ignoring the ancient Roman warning *si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare for war).



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Neglect always entails consequences. A brief overview of current world affairs clearly indicates new trends that not only drastically alter previous perceptions but necessitate new strategies and practical toolboxes for handling newly discovered challenges.

Neglect always entails consequences. A brief overview of current world affairs clearly indicates new trends that not only drastically alter previous perceptions but necessitate new strategies and practical toolboxes for handling newly discovered challenges. These could include diplomatic initiatives, economic policies, and security measures. The world seems to live in two parallel realities. The first group debates postmodernism, artificial intelligence, humanoid robots, universal pay, climate change, and gender identities. The second one is focused on overpopulation, wars, revisionist agendas, nationalism, and rising authoritarianism. A closer examination of these new trends can be instrumental in understanding them and determining what Western responses have been so far regarding this new reality and where Georgia stands in this turbulent process.

Brazen New World

Rise of the Global South

In recent decades, foreign policy pundits have actively discussed the so-called “North-South” division. The “South” stands for developing or underdeveloped nations, broadly referring to regions in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania historically marginalized in global economic and political systems. The ‘Global South’ is a term used to describe these regions, which are now witnessing a rise in influence, reshaping the dynamics of international relations, economics, and global governance.

One of the most notable aspects of this rise is the economic transformation occurring in many Global South countries. Nations like China, India, Brazil, and South Africa have emerged as major economic players on the global stage. China’s ascent to becoming the world’s second-largest economy is a prime example of this shift. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for instance, highlights China’s growing influence in infrastructure development across the Global South, fostering new economic ties and dependencies.

The rise of the Global South represents a transformative shift in global dynamics, driven by economic growth and political and security realignment, and it is imperative that we adapt to these changes.

West-dominated economic institutions, such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), are challenged by alternative institutions like the New Development Bank (NDB) and financially backed new global projects like the Sino-Centric Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, the Global South has become a critical battleground in the geopolitical competition between major powers. The United States, China, and Russia are all vying for influence in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, offering different models of development, security partnerships, and economic cooperation. This competition has provided Global South countries with more agency, allowing them to negotiate better terms in their engagements with these powers. The rise of the Global South represents a transformative shift in global dynamics, driven by economic growth and political and security realignment, and it is imperative that we adapt to these changes.

Rise of Nationalism

Nationalism has reemerged as a dominant force across various regions, reshaping the political landscape profoundly.

Globalization seemingly increased interdependence among states and “erased” many state borders for businesses, goods, and services. In parallel, while globalization has brought prosperity to many, it has also led to significant inequalities and the erosion of traditional industries in Western countries, a fact that cannot be ignored. This has fueled a sense of disenfranchisement among segments of the population who feel left behind by the global economy. Huge waves of refugees escaping wars and economic hardship flooded the West, causing the resurrection of nationalistic movements justified by the need to preserve not only national economies but national identities as well. Nationalism has reemerged as a dominant force across various regions, reshaping the political landscape profoundly. This is evident in the success of nationalist parties in Europe, such as the National Rally in France and the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which have gained support by promoting anti-immigration and anti-EU rhetoric. The “America First” policy of Donald Trump may elevate him again to the presidential post while Great Britain struggles with the consequences of Brexit caused by nationalist sentiments, particularly concerns about sovereignty and immigration.

In other parts of the world, nationalism has led to the rise of strongman leaders who emphasize national pride and assertiveness on the global stage. Leaders like Vladimir Putin in Russia, Narendra Modi in India, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey have all employed nationalist rhetoric to consolidate power and promote their agendas, often at the expense of democratic norms and international cooperation.

Crisis of International Law and International Institutions

International law, which has long served as the foundation for global peace, security, and cooperation, is facing a profound crisis. This crisis is characterized by increasing violations, selective enforcement, and growing skepticism about the effectiveness and fairness of the international legal system. As geopolitical tensions rise and powerful states flout established norms, the principles underpinning international law are being called into question.

The blatant disregard for international law by some of the world’s most powerful nations, like Russia and China, and manifold autocratic but wealthy regimes deepens the crisis. Reluctance by the most potent nations to enforce international law further enables and emboldens violators. Russia’s actions in and towards Ukraine contravene the fundamental principle of territorial integrity. Yet, international responses have been limited to sanctions and diplomatic condemnations, highlighting the challenges of enforcing international law against powerful states or at least against those who are supposed to be enforcers themselves due to their status in international institutions like the UN Security Council. Similarly, China’s activities in the South China Sea have been condemned as violations of international maritime law. Despite wide condemnation, China has continued its activities with little consequence, demonstrating the limitations of international legal mechanisms in the face of state defiance.

The perception that powerful countries can act with impunity erodes the rule of law at the global level. It weakens the ability of international institutions to maintain order and prevent conflict. Therefore, institutions like the UN, the ICC, and the OSCE, designed to safeguard the endurance of international law and order, are considered inade-

quate structures for new realities.

As global power dynamics shift and populism rises in many countries, there is growing resistance to existing international institutions and agreements. Nationalist leaders often prioritize sovereignty and unilateral action over multilateral cooperation, undermining the very foundations of international law.

Erosion of Human Rights and Sanctity of Human Life

Every year, on 10 December, the world is supposed to celebrate International Human Rights Day, commemorating the adaptation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer reasons to celebrate. Atrocities, be they in Ukraine, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or Africa, challenge one of the most fundamental rights—the right to life.

One can argue that this problem persisted even before. Still, the actions of Russia in Ukraine and Hamas in Israel added a new dimension to this problem – disregarding not only the opponents' lives but the lives of your people as well! In both cases, political leaders do not differentiate adversary militant combatants from civilians and put little effort (if any at all) to avoid civilian casualties. On the contrary – schools, kindergartens, hospitals, and other civic institutions are deliberately targeted. At the same time, the same political leaders treat their population as cannon fodder.

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori – is a phrase attributed to the Roman lyric Horace and translates as “It is sweet and proper to die for one's country.” The phrase intended to exhort Roman citizens to develop martial prowess of such magnitude that Rome's enemies would be too terrified to resist them. Even though just after World War I, this attitude has been heavily criticized and disre-

garded, current Russian or Hamas leaders are very actively employing the same notion in their political ambitions.

In both cases, Russia or Hamas, Russians or Gaza residents are dying not for the “homeland” but rather for the cynical, delusional, and dangerous ambitions of their leaders. Energy and resources allocated for their population's well-being are diverted to neighboring populations' misery. In contrast, the lives of their population are considered disposable for “greater goals.”

These actions violate international humanitarian law and demonstrate a strategic calculus that places military objectives above the basic principles of humanity and the protection of civilian life. Russian commanders are notoriously known for their profound disregard for soldiers' lives, sending them basically on a suicide mission to “jam” and exhaust Ukrainian defenses. Similar tactics were practiced by Soviet military commanders during the Second World War, resulting in exuberant and unnecessary casualties on the battlefield on the Soviet side.

Hamas has been accused of using civilians as human shields by embedding military assets within densely populated civilian areas. This tactic not only endangers the lives of Gazan civilians but also complicates Israel's military response, leading to increased civilian casualties. Russian and Hamas's actions reflect a deliberate strategy that prioritizes its political and military goals over the safety and well-being of the people it claims to represent.

The disregard for human life by Russia in Ukraine and Hamas in the Israel-Palestine conflict exemplifies the devastating human cost of modern warfare when fundamental principles of humanity are ignored.

The disregard for human life by Russia in Ukraine and Hamas in the Israel-Palestine conflict exemplifies the devastating human cost of modern warfare when fundamental principles of humanity are ignored. The actions of both actors have led to immense suffering and loss of life, underscoring the urgent need for the international community to address these violations and work towards a more just and humane global order.

Changing Warfare

Ukraine singlehandedly showed that modern warfare, even if human soldiers are irreplaceable, can be fought with drones, intelligence, and moral upswing. Kyiv demonstrated that having allies, albeit not with enough deep pockets and not always the swiftest, is instrumental in warding off enemy attacks. Defense of Kyiv, restoration of control over Kherson, and digging in Kharkiv and parts of Donetsk showed that the second largest army is not invincible, with all the deriving consequences.

More importantly, Ukraine started hitting Russia, a move that would have been incomprehensible just three years ago but is now a reality. Zelenskyy's calculated invasion of Kursk turned the tables, albeit temporarily, and erased further red lines. Now, for the Western leaders, it is less unacceptable if Ukraine, while defending itself, reaches against legitimate military targets. How far this red line can stretch is anyone's guess. Meanwhile, Ukrainian drones have hit Moscow. What was incredible and inadvisable three years ago seems to be the norm of the day today.

Is It All Doom and Gloom?

All of the above-listed tendencies severely challenged the world order and the role of the West in preserving global peace, stability, democracy, and human rights. It looks like manifold challenges are becoming increasingly hard to ignore, and one can

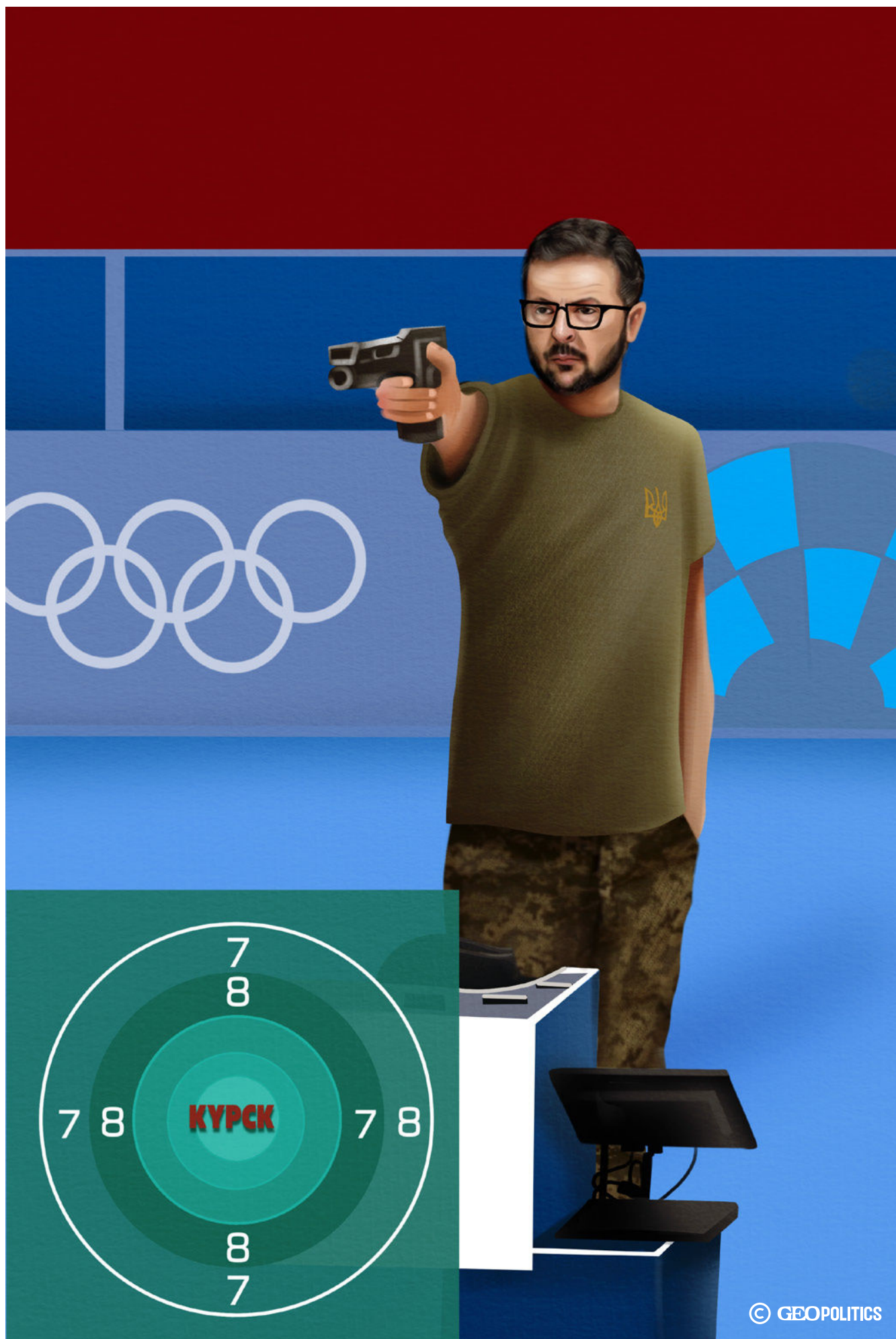
already notice not only wake-up calls but initial mobilization attempts as well.

It should be noted that new tendencies embody inherent deficiencies. The Global South faces significant challenges, including persistent poverty, inequality, political instability, and environmental degradation. For example, an increasing number of countries are less enthusiastic about welcoming Chinese investment or influence. China faces serious economic challenges and increasing resistance from the West, manifesting in trade wars and widespread countermeasures to Chinese influence.

Nationalistic movements can rise but have not scored enough to become a leading force in Europe. India, Turkey, and Brazil face their internal discontent and fragility. Nationalistic agendas cause severe population fragmentation; hence, every wannabe leader (including previous ones) started to adopt more conciliatory rhetoric and policies.

Enforcement of any law presumes superiority in the enforcer's power (military or economic or both). While international law and order were in crisis, Western countries started to seriously focus on renewing their military might, positioning power, and developing new technologies. Since the war in Ukraine, military expenditures have drastically risen, including revamping military production with high-end new technologies where the West still has an advantage. This new "arms race" has all the chances of resulting in another victory for the West in current confrontations and, consequently, redesigning international institutions and focusing on enforcing global order.

The actions of Russia and Hamas brought forth their further isolation. The ICC indicted Russian President Putin while economic sanctions made Russia heavily dependent on China, India, Iran, and North Korea. A capable and economically active



population is fleeing the country, and rising Islamic extremism has penetrated Russia's prison, adding to many other domestic troubles. Hamas brought misery and destruction to Gaza and its population. Its leadership is targeted by Israel and wanted by many Western countries. They cannot roam freely anymore, even within friendly countries like Iran. Iran itself is facing a challenge of humiliation and, more importantly, the perspective of dismantling the so costly and carefully crafted "Shia Crescent." Pro-Iranian forces, like Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis in Yemen, and pro-Iranian militia in Iraq, are actively targeted and ostracized.

Georgia's Political Dissociative Identity Disorder

Small states are disproportionately prone to international turmoil; hence, they always seek a safe harbor or an alliance where their sovereignty can be preserved.

Small states are disproportionately prone to international turmoil; hence, they always seek a safe harbor or an alliance where their sovereignty can be preserved. Given the current turbulence in the international arena, Georgia is in close geographic proximity to Russia, Ukraine, Iran, and the Middle East, so political choices are decisive in shaping the country's future.

In its current form, the Georgian political leadership contradicts its goals and actions. On the one hand, Georgia aspires to closer cooperation with the West and eventual integration into the EU and

NATO. In practice, rhetoric and, more importantly – actions drift Georgia further away from the West and Western institutions. The demonization of the West as a "global war party." became an essential part of the government's message box. Attempts to flirt with the Global South have not yet materialized any tangible benefits for the population of Georgia. Policies increasingly mimic the behavior of autocratic regimes with a corresponding erosion of Georgian democracy. The Georgian leadership offers instead a weird form of "patriotism" – not adherence to defending the motherland but rather a crusade against the "global war party" (a.k.a. the West) and its influence through "foreign agent" NGOs and "LGBTQ+ cabal, targeting Georgian identity."

Erosion of the state and democratic institutions results in a profound increase in human rights violations. International rules and norms are selectively adhered to, ditching unwanted ones as "attempts to infringe sovereignty."

There are no excellent scenarios for Georgia's current global confrontation. If the West prevails, it has little interest in working with the present Georgian leadership. If the Global South somehow retains its influence, Georgia, ostracized by the West, will become a weak state with a high chance of being a vassal state of one of the Southern power centers.

This "unanchored" position may be comfortable and beneficial for one particular individual (a.k.a. Bidzina Ivanishvili) but highly volatile to the Georgian state with the prospect of being dragged into the geopolitical vortex with severe consequences ■

Credits

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