The Illusion of Self-Government: Why Local Elections Don't Empower Citizens in Georgia

Local democracy is often considered the very foundation of democracy because it involves the direct participation of citizens in managing public affairs at the level closest to them: the municipality, the region, or the neighborhood. Local democracy is often seen as the school of democracy, a space for the concrete experimentation of democratic values: participation, responsibility, proximity, and solidarity. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his famous *Democracy in America*, wrote that "Communal institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science." For Tocqueville, local democracy (communes, municipalities) educates citizens in freedom and responsibility. It is a training ground for national democracy.

Participation in managing the citizens' immediate living environment is an activity that fosters citizens' autonomy, a fundamental component of any democratic system. This autonomy is far from perfect, even in countries where democracy is more rooted than in formerly communist states, but "without it, the political system is in ruins," as Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in *The Social Contract*.

Power Without Elections, Elections Without Power

Two examples illustrate the state of local democracy in Georgia. This illustration applies to most countries with imperfect or embryonic democracies and represents a serious risk, as it contains the seeds that can be exploited by anyone wishing to establish an authoritarian system.

The first example dates to early October 2012, when billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian

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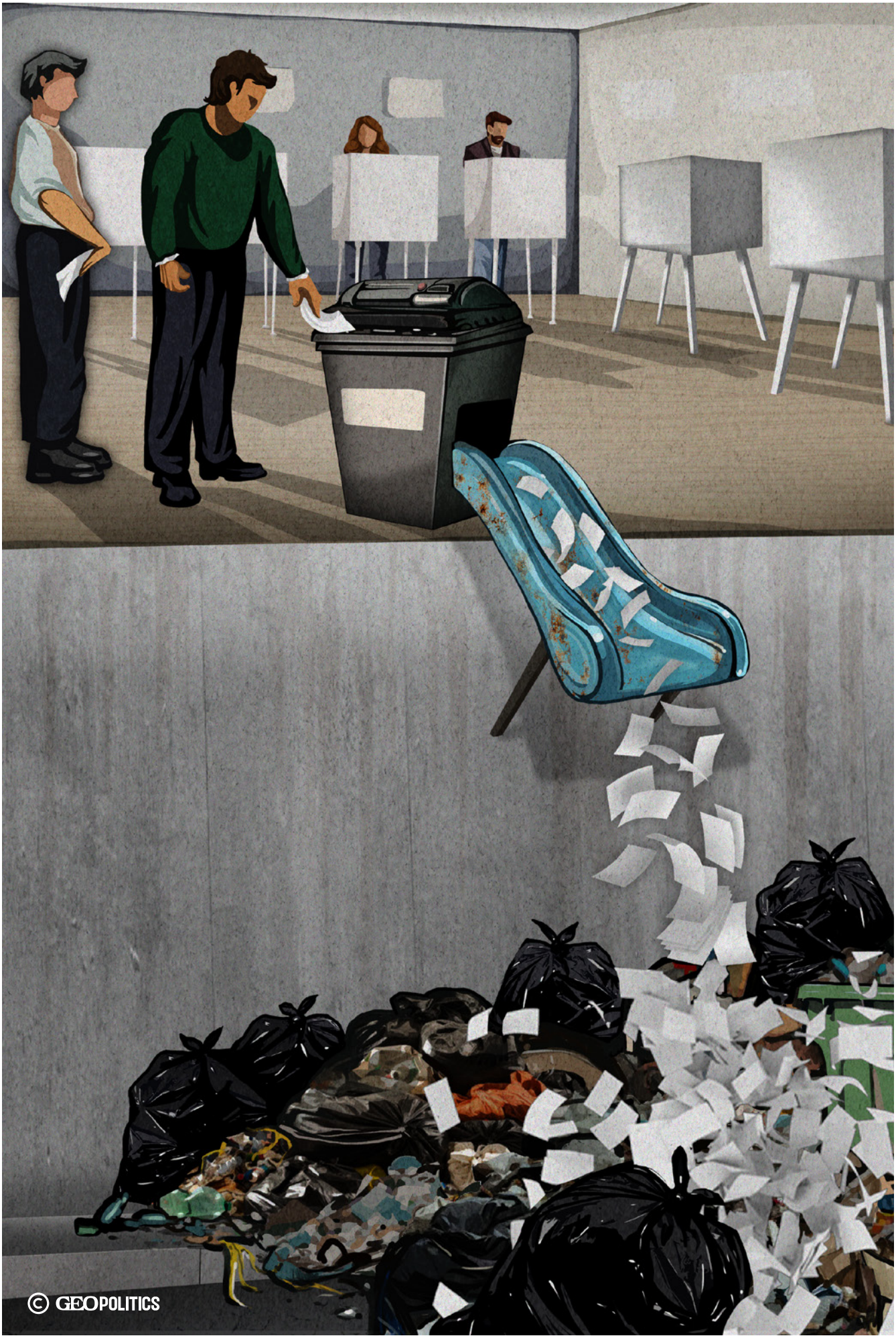
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Dream (GD) coalition won the parliamentary elections against Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM). Barely had the results been counted and the defeat acknowledged by the president himself, when members of municipal councils and mayors across multiple localities began to leave the defeated ruling party. Some directly joined the new majority party at the national level, while others deemed it modestly valuable to qualify themselves as "independents," thereby allowing the mayoralties to pass into the opposing camp.

In some municipalities, GD activists stormed the offices and seats of local powers, even though local elections were not scheduled until two years later. For these individuals, the UNM was defeated, and power, money, and material benefits associated with elected office should have passed to the new authorities, even though victory was only obtained at the national level. Some municipalities nevertheless kept the old majority, barely, until the elections. In the first post-Saakashvili municipal elections in 2014, GD gained control of all municipalities.

The second example comes from the 2021 municipal elections. GD, having been in power for nine years and controlling 100% of the country's political power, had by then practically completed the capture of the state institutions and established near-total control over the bureaucratic apparatus in its most minor details. The mastery of the electoral process was already well-honed, with its share of vote-buying, intimidation, and mobilization of administrative resources. But in October 2021, an unexpected event occurred: as the ruling party focused on overturning the first-round loss in all major cities (*Tbilisi*, *Kutaisi*, *Batumi*, *Zugdidi*, *and Rustavi*) by invalidating an unprecedented number of pro-opposition votes and organizing absolute mobilization of its voters, GD lost the election in the small municipality of *Tsalenjikha* (less than 30,000 inhabitants) in western Georgia. *Tsalenjikha* was the only municipality in the country where the opposition prevailed: the UNM list, led by Giorgi Kharchilava, a popular local figure, obtained 51.12% of the vote in the second round. Kharchilava's victory was unexpected for the government, which had not foreseen the defeat. Not surprisingly, the then Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili publicly described the opposition's victory in one locality as an anomaly and even a betrayal by *Tsalenjikha* inhabitants towards the country, since elsewhere GD had won.

The GD's reaction was revealing of the regime's very particular conception of democracy. Beyond the apparent lack of political culture — the Prime Minister seemed unaware that mayors of *Paris*, *Berlin*, *Vienna*, *London*, *and even Istanbul*, *Ankara*, and *Budapest* represented opposition parties — the ruling party employed all kinds of punitive measures against the rebellious municipality, including ignoring the opposition mayor during official visits to the region and meeting only representatives of their own party in *Tsalenjikha*.

These examples may seem exotic to a European observer or anyone from a country where democracy is a routine. More than symptoms, they are causes of a lack of democratic rooting in these countries: the absence or weakness of local democracy makes it difficult for democracy to exist at the central level, complicates the existence of political parties in the classical (Western) sense, and instead produces parties that are actually groups of individuals serving oligarchic interests or representing conglomerates of local notables who can change political labels according to circumstances.

A History of Centralism

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 'democratic transition,' establishing local democracy was the most challenging task alongside creating an independent judiciary. Although these are two distinct concepts, the analogy is not entirely

absurd because both can limit executive and legislative power at the central level. Accepting that these powers be independent (judiciary) or in the hands of a political opponent (local authorities) is the indispensable foundation of a genuine democratic regime.

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In Georgia, local power never truly existed during the Soviet era. The brief experience of the First Republic, with elections held between 1918 and 1920 for 20 regional councils (called *Eroba*, at the Mazra or Uyezd level), 26 municipal councils, and over 400 village councils (*Temi* level), was insufficient to establish the tradition. Even though the *Eroba* achieved remarkable things in 2-3 years (opening schools, libraries, building roads, including railways, founding theaters and municipal enterprises).

After the collapse of the ultra-centralized Soviet system organized around the *Gosplan*, the country went through a chaotic 1990s marked by civil wars and wars against the Russian invasion in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region. This instability period did not allow the governments of the first and second presidents, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze, to establish genuine local self-government. Central authorities appointed by the executive governed regions and localities: *Prefects* under Gamsakhurdia and Governors (at the regional or *Mkhare* level, about ten in total) and *Gamgebelis* (at the smaller *Raioni* level, 74 in total) under Shevardnadze. The national executive also appointed mayors of major cities.

Decentralization Without Empowerment

The first local elections took place on November 15, 1998, when local councils (at the city and *Raioni* levels) were elected by direct universal suffrage. Mayors and *Gamgebelis* continued to be appointed but had to report to the elected entities — municipal councils (*Sakrebulos*). It is interesting to recall that, despite the centrally appointed mayorship of Tbilisi, the first direct universal municipal elections in the capital brought victory to opposition parties. In 1998, the *Labour Party* won the presidency of the local council (*Sakrebulo*), while in 2002, the opposition party's leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, was elected as a *Sakrebulo* chief. In subsequent elections, however, ruling parties consistently won, and previous opposition victories can be explained by the relative weakness of the ruling party at the time (Eduard Shevardnadze's *Citizens' Union*), and also by the fact that the appointed mayor retained most of the power, and the role and influence of *Sakrebulos* was not that high.

Over the years, legislation allowed more local democracy, notably introducing the election of mayors, as they began to be elected first by *Sakrebulos* and then (from 2014) by direct universal suffrage. However, this process was not necessarily accompanied by the empowerment of citizens at the local level. On the contrary, one can affirm that the dominant national political force gradually strengthened its grip on local power structures, using elections as a tool.

Georgia's decentralization reforms were often inspired by the process of rapprochement with the EU and European integration. Initially, the Council of Europe and later the EU were key drivers behind these reforms, which the ruling elites accepted in response to the European aspirations of the vast majority of Georgians. For example, the ratification in 2004 of the European Charter of Local

Self-Government served as a significant catalyst for reforms, as did the signing of the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU in 2013.

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However, institutional decentralization, when not accompanied by fiscal and political decentralization, cannot create the necessary conditions for the emergence of local democracy. Consequently, this also undermines democracy at the national level.

Although central governments formally adopted decentralization reforms, they were not genuinely prepared to implement them. Instead, they often used these reforms to consolidate and centralize power. Some scholars have described this phenomenon as "decentralization without empowerment." Empowerment can only occur when institutional reform is accompanied by two essential processes: fiscal decentralization and the emergence of a local political class, fostered by the development of a local political life with its own politicians, parties, and political groups.

Yet in Georgia, no central government has truly encouraged these processes. For instance, while launching decentralization reforms, the United National Movement refused to abandon fiscal centralism. The introduction of the flat tax—justified by a particular macroeconomic vision—deprived municipalities of revenue and made them more dependent on central transfers. In 2009, the same UNM created the Ministry of Infrastructure and Regional Development, which, in practice, became the institution that kept the regions in a state of dependency and subordination.

As for the GD government, it initially adopted several reforms, encouraged by the Association Agreement it had signed earlier. These included the direct universal election of mayors and the abolition of the *Gamgebeli* position. However, many other planned reforms were quickly abandoned; for example, the creation of Regional Councils (at the *Mkhare* level) and the election of regional presidents by these councils to replace the centrally appointed *Rtsmunebuli*, who do not have the legal status of a self-governing authority. Some gains were even reversed, such as the removal of self-governing city status for 7 out of 12 cities, which were reintegrated into their respective district (*Raioni*) municipalities.

No Fiscal Power

GD did nothing to increase fiscal decentralization. The 2019 reform, which allocated 19% of VAT revenues to local budgets, has been postponed. This mechanism was to graduallly replace equalization transfers, which had previously been the main form of fiscal transfer. Even when implemented, the system still implied dependency on the center, since VAT is collected at the national level before redistribution. While the overall volume of transfers to local budgets has increased significantly—from approximately GEL 1 billion in 2013 to over GEL 3 billion today—fiscal decentralization remains very limited. Georgia ranks among the countries with the lowest share of locally collected taxes, particularly property tax, contributing less than 5% of total state revenues.

In addition to VAT-related transfers (accounting for nearly 60% of total transfers), capital transfers and targeted transfers make up the remaining third. There are also so-called special transfers, which are volatile and represent the funds most directly linked to political clientelism—statistics show significant spikes in these during election years.

Local Governance as Clientelism: Where Patronage Replaces Politics

The current state of decentralization in Georgia does not allow for the development of genuine local democracy. Local political life is either virtually non-existent or exists only in a fragmented and limited form. The system does not support the existence of strong opposition political parties in the regions. When the provision of public goods and social services is monopolized by local administrations controlled by the ruling party, and law enforcement is also at the service of the regime, the space for political debate and competition is drastically narrowed.

Two other institutions with a full territorial presence further reduce this space: the Church and the criminal or para-criminal underworld (composed of idle youth - *Kai Bichebi*, claiming to "control the streets" and "uphold a masculinist morality"). These forces are regime allies, albeit in constant negotiation over the terms of the alliance.

Opposition politicians, especially in the regions, often struggle to survive due to a lack of access to public funding. As *Max Weber* once said, a professional politician lives "for and from politics." Politics is a profession and a career path essential to democracy; it should not be something morally questionable. To engage in politics properly, it must be a politician's primary—if not exclusive—occupation. This requires specialized skills and knowledge, and must be practiced seriously, unlike amateurs or dilettantes.

If a politician cannot be elected and compensated through an electoral mandate—a process that began in Europe in the late 19th century—then politics becomes the domain of "notables," thanks to their wealth, capital, and income. Since ruling parties in authoritarian regimes do not want genuine opposition parties to emerge, they aim to prevent professional political careers by monopolizing both elective offices, their associated compensations, and public sector jobs.

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This explains why opposition parties struggle to build permanent structures in the regions and why they seek wealthy patrons among oligarchs (for instance, Mamuka Khazaradze's *Lelo – Strong Georgia*). As GD's authoritarianism becomes more entrenched, publicly funded political careers have become inaccessible, and the only opposition party maintaining regional structures—the UNM—is now on the verge of being declared illegal and banned.

The Death of Local Politics: No Life Outside the Ruling Party

As for locally elected officials under the GD label, they are aware that their election directly depends on party loyalty. Once in office, their ability to maintain their political clientele through the provision of public goods (such as road maintenance, schools, medical services, and social assistance) also depends on transfers from the center.

Among these GD local officials is a distinct category of local notables—prominent figures and wealthy businessmen who do not seek to live off political office but rather to protect and grow their business interests. These regional barons often sit in the national parliament. Before the switch to a fully proportional electoral system, they were

elected in majoritarian constituencies where they financed their own campaigns, delivered votes for GD's national proportional list, and donated funds to the party. Their relationship with GD resembled a franchise contract: in return for public contracts won by their companies, a portion of the profits was donated back to the party.

After the elimination of majoritarian MPs, these millionaire MPs from the provinces joined the party lists through a calculated cost-benefit approach. These local *minigarchs* are deeply entrenched in their regions and often change political affiliations depending on which party rules the country. There are emblematic cases of individuals winning elections under a different party banner each time. On successive election posters, the faces remain the same, only the party changes. This includes figures like Anzor Bolkvadze from mountainous *Khulo* in *Adjara*, Enzel Mkoyan from *Ninotsminda*, *Javakheti*, and Gocha Enukidze from *Ambrolauri*, *Racha*, all of whom have been elected at various times under the Citizens' Union, the United National Movement, and Georgian Dream.

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This fragmentary form of local democracy, like Tocqueville's failing school of democracy, is at least partly responsible for the shortcomings of Georgian democracy as a whole. In Georgia, local democracy has long remained an unfulfilled promise — often invoked in reform agendas, but rarely pursued with conviction. While legislative changes and international agreements have at times nudged the system toward greater decentralization, the reality on the ground remains one of entrenched centralism, fiscal dependency, political monopolization, and institutional fragility. The country's leaders have mastered the optics of reform while maintaining the substance of control. What results is a façade of local self-governance — elections without empowerment, councils without autonomy, and mayors without means.

The examples of 2012 and 2021 are not mere political anecdotes. They are the clearest indicators of a system in which power flows not from the people to their representatives, but from the top down — guided by party loyalty, administrative muscle, and economic dependency. The Georgian Dream's grip on local power has not only suffocated democratic competition; it has also distorted the very idea of what politics is and who can participate in it. With local governance reduced to a mechanism of patronage and control, aspiring politicians without access to wealth or proximity to the ruling elite are excluded from public life. In such a system, democracy cannot grow; it is merely managed.

Managed Democracy Georgian Style: Do Local Elections Have Any Meaning?

Now, let's reflect on how relevant the common European advice — "*strengthen democracy from the bottom up, participate in local elections*" - is in the current context of Georgia. My short answer, which I also explored in greater detail in another article published in this journal, is that in authoritarian regimes, local elections can be weaponized by the ruling party to consolidate power, rather than to decentralize it or empower citizens. It may sound good in theory, but it ignores the political realities on the ground. Participating in local elections under current conditions does not serve democracy in Georgia — and this well-meaning European advice is misguided, if not counterproductive.

And this is mainly because GD evolved from hybrid to consolidated authoritarianism, and the West, along with some political actors in Georgia, is always one step behind. The Georgian opposition had the illusion that in 2024, despite the sophisticated falsification techniques, the GD would not be able to steal more ballots than usual (as it had in 2018, 2020, or 2021) and that this time it wouldn't suffice, given their significant lead in the polls. In fact, GD went far beyond what was expected in terms of election manipulation, leaving the opposition with no chance. Today, we stand in October 2025, and the situation is way worse than it was a year ago.

> ***Local elections in Georgia have consistently failed to produce meaningful local autonomy.***

As explained above, authoritarian leaders view elections as a means to increase their legitimacy and control. As for local elections, they see it as a tool of centralized control — not local empowerment. Contrary to democratic theory, local elections in Georgia have consistently failed to produce meaningful local autonomy. Neither under UNM nor under GD were elected local officials given real power or resources. What passed for decentralization was largely cosmetic. In both cases, elected local officials remained fiscally dependent on the central government, and the executive's appointments of regional officials circumvented local self-government entirely. Real decision-making remained centralized, even after reforms.

So when European advisors urge the Georgian opposition to "rebuild trust through local democracy," they mistake the form for the substance. The form exists (elections), but the substance (autonomy, accountability, fiscal independence) does not. It didn't happen in 30 years of independence and several reforms (1991-2021), and it will not happen now, as the country is increasingly moving towards dictatorship.

When Participation Becomes a Collaboration

The 2025 local elections are even more flawed than any other "not free and fair elections" ever organized in Georgia. The authorities didn't permit recognized international observers to attend; a handful of marginal, far-right Western conspiracy theorists and Belarusian or Turkmen electoral observers brought in by the regime can't be taken into consideration. Neither local NGO's, apart from several clearly GD proxy GONGOs, had the opportunity to watch them for the first time in recent history. In more than one-third of the municipalities, GD was the only political force to have mayoral candidates, who garnered 100% of the votes on 4 October. And no free political advertisements were available to the opposition parties due to changes in the law that deprived parties of free political advertisement time if they boycotted the parliament or relinquished their mandates. Interestingly, GD's de facto "authorized opposition", *Girchi*, even after failing to clear the 3% threshold in national elections, benefited from the friendly gesture of the government and obtained free political ad time.

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The context today is even more dangerous than it was before. Until recently (2024), despite GD centralizing power and misusing local institutions, it still operated within a competitive authoritarian framework. In recent years, the regime has taken the system much closer to a Belarus-style authoritarianism with the suppression of media, prosecution of political opponents, criminalization of civil society, and laws on "foreign agents." In this en-

vironment, opposition participation in local elections no longer even poses symbolic resistance — it merely helps the regime maintain a pluralistic facade. The playing field is not just tilted; the game is rigged. This mirrors the "managed democracy" model seen in Russia or Belarus, where participation serves the regime more than the opposition.

The participation of some opposition parties creates the illusion of competition, when in fact the outcome is predetermined through the control of media, courts, police, and funding. It divided and weakened the opposition by encouraging infighting over local posts and resources. The co-optation, intimidation, and clientelism draw opposition figures into the regime's orbit or neutralize them entirely. Far from empowering civil society or decentralizing governance, the participation of some opposition parties in local elections provoked much more severe battles among the opposition forces than against the GD.

Why Friends Miss This Point?

European institutions often insist that democracy can be rebuilt "from the bottom up." This advice assumes that elections automatically empower people, as they do in functioning democracies. However, in Georgia, local elections have historically served as tools to entrench central authority rather than challenge it. Participation has not democratized the country; instead, it has helped governing forces expand their reach, control narratives, and co-opt opposition structures.

> ***Participation without empowerment is collaboration, not resistance.***

For the opposition, continuing to play this game without fundamental reforms — especially fiscal and political decentralization — only reinforces their own marginalization. This makes many believe that participation without empowerment is collaboration, not resistance.

The real question is not whether to participate in, or even win local elections, but how to change the rules of the game — and whether that can happen within a system increasingly indistinguishable from full authoritarianism ■