

The Georgian Dream's Migrant Disenfranchisement: Cash Machines Without a Say

The Georgian Dream (GD) recently [initiated](#) changes to the electoral law that will strip Georgian citizens living abroad of their right to vote in general elections. Party leaders justify this decision as a measure to “strengthen electoral resilience” and prevent foreign interference. While countries such as Moldova and Romania have exposed Russian meddling in their electoral processes, Georgian Dream leaders instead claim that the main source of interference comes from the European Union—Germany, in particular.

As “proof,” Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili cited the 2024 parliamentary elections, which he described as an example of “open and blatant foreign informational and political pressure.” [According to him](#), statements by European officials allegedly influenced Georgian voters abroad. At the

same time, the Georgian Dream advances another argument: since Georgia [does not open](#) polling stations in Russia due to the occupation of Georgian territories and the absence of diplomatic relations, it would be “logical,” in the party’s view, to extend similar restrictions to other migrant voters abroad as well.

Yet, this political framing carefully avoids a key reality: migrants’ participation was already severely restricted through physical and administrative barriers during the 2024 or previous elections. Despite clear demand, the government [refused](#) to authorize the opening of additional election districts abroad, even in countries with rapidly growing Georgian communities. As a result, thousands of voters were [assigned](#) to a single overcrowded polling station per country or region, often hundreds of kilometers away. For many migrants, who mainly work



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This illustration continues the visual narrative from our [I](#) and [II](#) volumes, drawn in the style peculiar to Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani.

in low-paid, informal jobs, travel costs, time off work, and fear of attracting attention from migration authorities made participation practically unattainable.

Thus, although significantly more people wanted to vote in 2024, the physical and administrative structure of the voting process effectively suppressed participation.

The official turnout figures from abroad provide important context for the scale of participation in recent elections. In 2012, [8,750](#) Georgian citizens voted from abroad. This number declined to [4,816](#) in 2016, then rose to [12,247](#) in 2020, before reaching [34,574](#) in 2024—despite the administrative barriers imposed that year.

What makes these figures sensitive is not their size but their direction. In all three elections—2016,

2020, and 2024—the Georgian Dream lost decisively among voters abroad. Its support fell from [39.6%](#) in 2016 to [29.3%](#) in 2020 and collapsed to [13.5%](#) in 2024. While migrant votes alone do not currently threaten the Georgian Dream's grip on power, their political orientation clearly signals an uncomfortable truth for the ruling party. In countries where the Georgian Dream cannot weaponize poverty, intimidate public servants, or control voters through administrative pressure, its support is dismally low. The diaspora votes from environments free of coercion and patronage reveal what Georgian political preferences look like when citizens are economically secure and politically unpressured. And that is precisely why the ruling party finds the diaspora's verdict so threatening.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, around 1.5 million Georgian citizens [live](#) abroad, with major communities in Russia, Greece, the United States,

Italy, and Germany. A crucial factor is that a large share of these migrants live without legal residence permits, placing them in an especially vulnerable position.

Given that migrant votes remain numerically limited but politically symbolic, the question remains unavoidable: Why is the Georgian Dream moving to eliminate even this restrained participation—and why at this moment?

The Georgian Dream Still Seeks International Legitimacy

Despite the visible drift toward one-party dictatorship, violent crackdowns on protests, political prosecutions, and the effective suspension of Georgia's EU accession process, the Georgian Dream continues to care deeply about its international image and symbolic legitimacy.

This explains why the party reacted sharply to the critical European Commission Enlargement [Report](#) published in November 2025. It also clarifies why the government [insisted](#) on initiating a human rights dialogue with the European Union and why Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze persistently [seeks](#) invitations to the European Political Community summits. The ruling elite systematically uses every opportunity to appear alongside EU leaders, carefully curating photographs, handshakes, and diplomatic visibility. This is why the photos of the Foreign Minister Maka Botchorishvili at the OSCE ministerial in Vienna were widely distributed by the state propaganda, stressing that the Georgian minister is well received by colleagues from Slovakia, Luxembourg, or the OSCE secretary general.

Against this backdrop, the sharp discrepancy between voting behavior inside Georgia and among migrants abroad becomes deeply problematic for the ruling party. In the 2024 elections, 86.5% of migrants voted for the opposition while only 13.5%

supported the Georgian Dream. Inside Georgia, by contrast, the government officially [secured](#) 54% of the vote, despite widespread reports of vote-buying, misuse of administrative resources, voter intimidation, and media capture.

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This contrast fuels domestic and international doubts about electoral integrity. Excluding migrants from voting abroad helps the Georgian Dream remove the most visually striking evidence of this contradiction. Although the party claims that similar restrictions exist in countries such as Ireland or Malta, this argument selectively ignores the broader European trend toward expanding, not narrowing, external voting rights.

In countries such as Malta and Ireland, the restriction on external voting arises from long-standing constitutional and political considerations rather than the fear of foreign political pressure. Malta's position is shaped by its small electorate, where even a modest number of overseas voters could shift the balance in a tightly contested political landscape. Successive Maltese governments have argued that extending the franchise abroad would effectively empower non-resident citizens to determine domestic outcomes without bearing the social and economic consequences of their decisions. Ireland's stance is different but similarly grounded in constitutional caution: the country has grappled for decades with how to integrate a vast diaspora—many of whom have been abroad for generations—into a political system premised on residency. Irish policymakers have consistently expressed concern that extending full voting rights abroad could dilute the legitimacy of elections and tie national politics to transnational identities that the state cannot practically represent. In both cases, the debate is open, public, and rooted in transparent domestic reasoning.

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The Georgian Dream’s justification bears no resemblance to these democratic dilemmas. Rather than citing constitutional principles, demographic constraints, or philosophical debates about residency and representation, the ruling party has chosen to claim—without evidence—that host countries would exert “political pressure” on Georgian migrants to influence Georgian elections. This argument collapses under scrutiny. Georgians abroad vote overwhelmingly in free environments with functioning democratic institutions and no European government conducts political mobilization of foreign nationals as an instrument of foreign policy. What the Georgian Dream fears, therefore, is not foreign pressure but the absence of domestic pressure: the inability to intimidate, monitor, or manipulate voters in settings where the party’s usual tools—poverty, administrative leverage, and media capture—hold no sway. Unlike Malta and Ireland, which grapple with the complexities of diaspora enfranchisement in good faith, the Georgian Dream invokes imaginary threats to conceal its real objective: eliminating a segment of the electorate that consistently rejects it at the ballot box.

Snap Elections, Managed Outcomes, and Strategic Exclusion

Following the 2024 elections, the Georgian Dream preserved power with 89 seats out of 150, yet fell short of the constitutional majority of 113 seats needed to unilaterally amend the Constitution. This remains a key obstacle in the party’s longer-term project of institutional consolidation.

At the same time, pro-government proxy movements, such as *United Neutral Georgia*, have openly questioned Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic trajectory, advocating a “neutrality” model and even [calling](#) for a national referendum on EU membership. Historically, such narratives tend to migrate from proxy groups into official government policy.

Yet, a central legal barrier remains: [Article 78](#) of the Constitution obliges all constitutional bodies to pursue Georgia’s integration into the EU and NATO. Overcoming this would require a constitutional change.

One possible mechanism is snap parliamentary elections, particularly when the opposition parties are [banned](#), the remaining forces are fragmented, and might still boycott the process. Under such circumstances, the Georgian Dream’s chances of securing a constitutional majority would significantly increase.

At first glance, if opposition parties boycott elections, migrants’ participation might seem strategically irrelevant. However, it remains critically important because the migrant participation, even in limited numbers, undermines the appearance of uncontested legitimacy by visibly demonstrating political dissent. Migrant voting abroad also inev-

itably becomes a reference point for international observers when assessing the credibility of electoral outcomes.

At the same time, the ruling party is already systematically distancing Georgia from the European Union in practice through legislative restrictions, [attacks](#) on civil society, and the consolidation of executive power while rhetorically denying this shift. In this context, excluding migrants is part of a broader effort to reshape the political playing field in advance of decisive institutional changes, including potential constitutional amendments and a managed foreign policy reorientation.

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More Migrants Means Fewer Votes

Georgia has been a net emigration country since its independence. Today, approximately 1.5 million Georgian citizens live abroad. Traditionally, emigration was driven by economic insecurity, unemployment, healthcare needs, and access to education. These drivers remain fully intact. A May 2024 survey [showed](#) that 45% of Georgia's population expressed interest in temporary emigration. Despite recent growth indicators, around 700,000 citizens still [depend](#) on social assistance.

What has changed is that political repression and democratic rollback have become powerful new push factors. Public intimidation, criminalization of protest, and the shrinking space for dissent increasingly push politically active citizens, especially youth, journalists, and civil society actors, out of the country.

Pro-government figures have openly reinforced this logic. Some have publicly suggested that those uncomfortable with the country's political direction should simply leave. As a result, the pool of politically engaged migrants abroad is growing steadily.

Yet, returning to Georgia to vote is not a realistic option for most migrants. The obstacles they face are deeply structural. Many work in informal sectors without any legal employment protections, which means that even short absences can lead to immediate dismissal. A large share lives without residence permits, so travel carries the risk of deportation, job loss, or permanent re-entry bans. For low-wage workers, the cost of airfare alone often exceeds several months' income, making even a brief trip financially impossible. Added to this is the fear—especially among politically active migrants—of harassment or legal repercussions upon re-entering the country.

In this context, the Georgian Dream's claim that migrants should simply return home to vote is a mere talking point rather than a genuine option. The government knows full well that for most migrants, returning is economically, legally, and politically unfeasible.

Migrants as Cash Machines

While the Georgian Dream pushes migrants out of political life, it remains profoundly dependent on them economically. Remittances are not simply private transfers between families; they have become a central pillar of Georgia's economic stability. When the Georgian Dream came to power in 2012, [remittances](#) totaled USD 1.77 billion. By 2024, they had climbed to USD 4.06 billion—roughly a tenth of the country's entire GDP. These flows keep households afloat, sustain consumption, support small businesses, and cover essential expenses such as education and healthcare. They also cushion the effects of unemployment and inflation nationwide.

At the macroeconomic level, remittances help stabilize the national currency, expand domestic demand, and, indirectly, raise tax revenues through increased consumption. They ease pressure on the welfare system and reduce the likelihood of social unrest in economically fragile regions. Despite this, a new government narrative has taken hold. Figures such as MP Davit Matikashvili now [claim](#) that remittances do not benefit the state because they do not enter the budget directly. This line of reasoning is misleading. Remittances circulate through the broader economy, generating VAT and excise revenue, stimulating employment, and reinforcing financial-sector stability. Without them, poverty would deepen and the fiscal situation would be far more precarious.

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Migrants thus sustain the economy in ways the government cannot replicate. Yet, from the Georgian Dream's perspective, they remain economically indispensable but politically troublesome. Once the ruling party concluded that even a small diaspora vote could complicate its long-term consolidation plans, it moved to eliminate migrant participation while continuing to rely on their earnings. The result is a system in which migrants are valued as financial lifelines but stripped of political agency. As we wrote earlier, for the Georgian Dream, migrants are no more than cash machines and soon - voteless ones ■