

# Georgia Disenfranchised

**O**n May 21, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's Monitoring Committee [warned](#) that the conditions for holding genuinely democratic elections do not currently exist in Georgia. This was not the first critical assessment of Georgia's democratic trajectory, nor was it the first warning about deteriorating political conditions. For years, observers raised concerns about the use of administrative resources, pressure on opposition parties, selective justice, voter intimidation, media imbalance, and weaknesses in electoral administration. Recently published OSCE/ODIHR's Moscow Mechanism [Report](#) on Georgia had similar findings, with a set of dozens of recommendations on how to backtrack Georgia's authoritarian turn. Those concerns remain valid and will affect Georgia's political landscape for the next few months and years. Yet focusing only on these familiar problems increasingly risks missing the scale of what has taken place over the last two years.

The nature of the problem has changed. Previous elections in Georgia were primarily associated with the manipulation of electoral outcomes. In 2020,

debates centered on voter carousels and alleged irregularities in vote counting. In 2024, the focus shifted toward [violations](#) of vote secrecy, extensive use of state institutions for electoral mobilization, and allegations regarding the use of migrant identities and passports. Those practices represented serious distortions of democratic competition. However, they still operated within an assumption that the core architecture of political participation remained intact. The expectation was that elections were fundamentally competitive but were being unfairly managed.

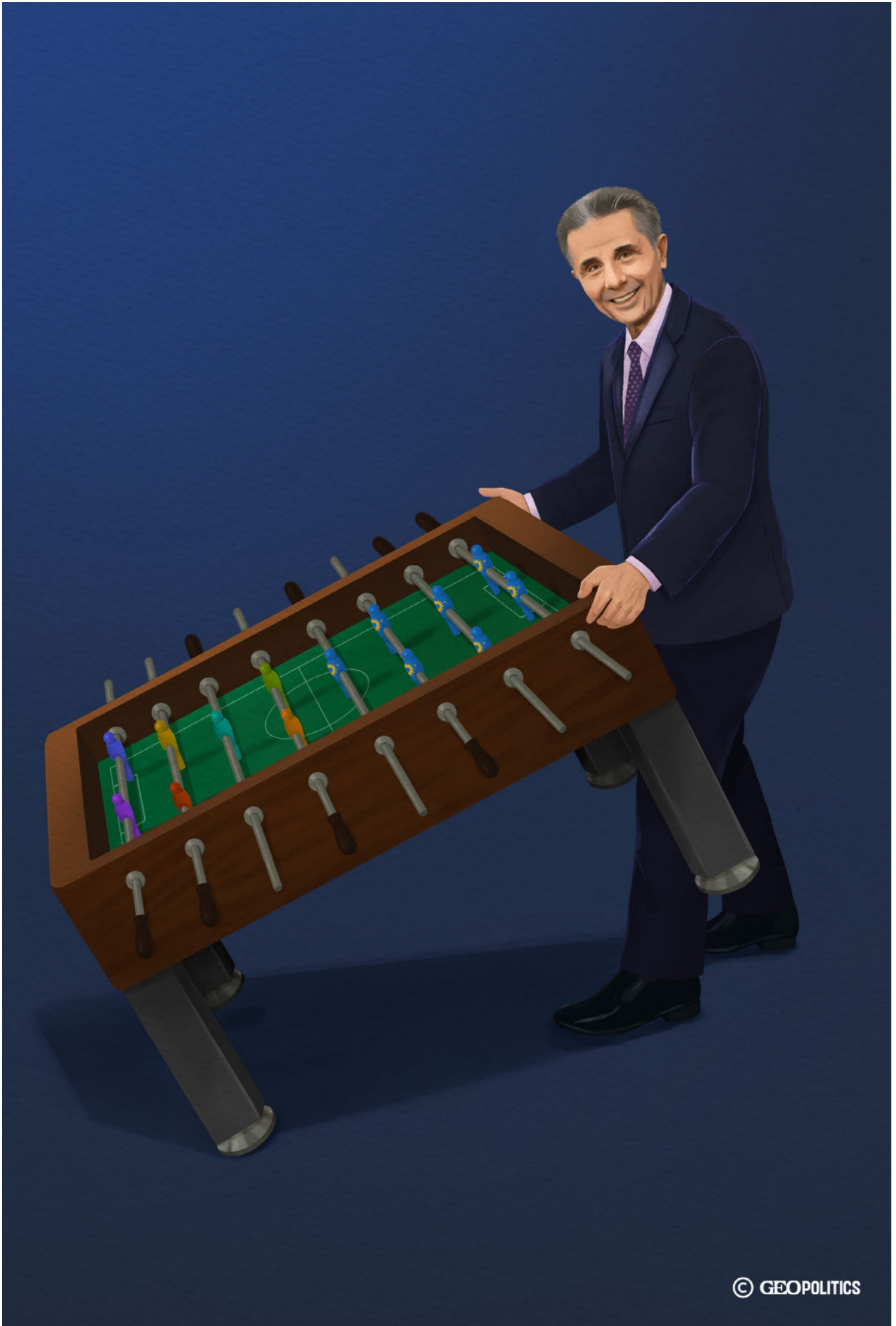
That assumption is no longer sustainable.

The current million-dollar question is whether elections continue to preserve their democratic meaning. Elections derive legitimacy not merely from the existence of ballot boxes or formal procedures. Their legitimacy rests on an underlying principle that political participation remains open and accessible. Citizens must have a realistic possibility to vote, to organize, to compete, to criticize, and to seek public office.



**SERGI KAPANADZE**  
Editor and Contributor

Dr. Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International Relations and European Integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Kapanadze was a Vice-Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia in 2016-2020 and a Deputy Foreign Minister in 2011-2012. He is a co-founder and former director and chairman of the board of the Georgia-based think tank – Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS). He received a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.



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Recent developments illustrate that Georgian Dream (GD) has increasingly moved beyond influencing electoral outcomes toward reshaping the electorate and the political field itself. Rather than simply seeking advantages within democratic competition, the Georgian Dream government has gradually acquired greater influence over determining who may participate in politics altogether. Political rights are now conditional rather than universal. Certain categories of citizens face growing barriers to entering politics, voting in practice, organizing collectively, financing political activities, or remaining politically active without legal consequences.

This transformation has affected both dimensions of democratic representation. On one side stand citizens as voters. On the other side stand citizens as candidates, political leaders, and representatives. Both sides are being disenfranchised. Citizens living abroad have been stripped of their voting rights. Civil society professionals and reform-oriented experts face legal barriers to parliamentary participation. Political parties face potential elimination through constitutional procedures. Opposition leaders increasingly operate under conditions of permanent legal pressure and the shadow of jail. Public protest has become associated with growing financial and personal risks. Civic activism increasingly risks being interpreted as political activity requiring state scrutiny and regulation.

Elections remain critically important for Georgia. No sustainable political change can occur without them. Georgia's next government will ultimately derive its legitimacy from a public mandate rather

than from permanent protest movements, external intervention, informal political arrangements, or even revolution. The international community, Georgian political actors, and society at large increasingly face a difficult reality that requires recognition. The problems that defined previous elections are no longer sufficient for understanding the current moment.

Georgia is no longer confronting only an uneven playing field. Increasingly, it is confronting a situation where the field itself has been tilted heavily in favor of one side.

## **Hidden Electoral and the Narrowing of Political Citizenship**

One of the most significant developments behind Georgia's democratic deterioration has received relatively little public attention because it does not look like a traditional restriction of political rights. There were no constitutional amendments explicitly prohibiting certain citizens from seeking office. No law explicitly declared that specific social groups cannot become members of parliament. Instead, a more sophisticated mechanism emerged, one that formally preserves rights while quietly removing the practical means through which those rights can be exercised.

A detailed [legal analysis](#) prepared by Tamar Ketsbaia for Gnomon Wise describes this process as the creation of "hidden electoral qualifications." Recent legislative amendments fundamentally altered Georgian citizens' access to political parties, which are the only vehicle for political change in a proportional electoral system. The new Election Code, adopted in late 2025, [prohibits](#) political parties from placing non-party members on electoral lists. This change already reduces opportunities for independent experts, civic leaders, academics, or public figures to enter politics through party structures without formal party membership. The significance of this amendment is more evident when combined with another legislative change.

In March 2026, amendments to the Law on Political Unions [prohibited](#) individuals who had received income through employment contracts from organizations classified as entities [carrying](#) “foreign interests” from becoming party members for eight years after receiving such income. The cumulative effect of these two measures creates a restriction that avoids openly prohibiting parliamentary participation while, in practice, producing exactly that outcome. A citizen employed by a civil society organization, watchdog institution, donor-funded policy initiative, independent media outlet, election monitoring organization, or advocacy group may now face restrictions on their ability to join political parties. Since parliamentary participation is entirely dependent on party lists and party membership, access to parliament itself becomes effectively closed.

The significance of these laws lies not only in their legal construction but also in the social groups they affect. These restrictions do not target individuals convicted of anti-constitutional crimes or acts that threaten the democratic order. They apply to people whose professional biographies include work with organizations engaged in democratic reforms, governance projects, anti-corruption efforts, public policy analysis, media activities, or civil society initiatives. In many democratic systems, such experience would be regarded as valuable preparation for public service. In Georgia’s evolving authoritarian legal framework, it increasingly becomes a basis for political persecution.

## Political Quarantine and the Logic of Permanent Suspicion

The eight-year restriction itself creates an additional set of problems that extend beyond electoral access and move into broader constitutional territory. Georgian Dream [justified](#) the measure as a necessary “cooling-off period,” arguing that financial relationships with organizations designated as carrying foreign interests pose risks of political influence that require time to disappear, and thus

the “revolving door” principle, which many democracies take pride in, should be outlawed in Georgia.

Traditional cooling-off mechanisms are based on identifiable risks. A former regulator may be prevented from immediately joining industries that he or she previously supervised because of concerns involving insider information, institutional influence, or conflicts of interest. The restriction is linked to a specific function and a specific risk. It aims to prevent concrete abuses rather than hypothetical future loyalties.

The Georgian version rests on a much broader assumption. It effectively presumes that lawful employment itself creates political contamination. Receiving a salary from an organization receiving foreign funding becomes treated as sufficient evidence of possible political influence, regardless of the nature of the work performed, the amount received, the person’s role within the organization, or any demonstrated conduct against Georgian interests.

The practical implications are almost impossible to reconcile with constitutional logic. Technical employees, researchers, translators, project coordinators, accountants, or support staff can all be subject to the same restrictions regardless of their actual activities. The law leaves little room for individual assessment. Political risk is therefore attached not to actions but to professional biographies, which is unconstitutional. In the country where the Constitutional Court is controlled by an oligarch, nothing can be done about it.

This unconstitutional tool, in the hands of the Georgian Dream, is further sharpened through the principle of retroactivity. Prior to the introduction of legislation regulating organizations allegedly pursuing foreign interests, individuals working for NGOs, media institutions, or policy organizations had no reason to expect that lawful employment relationships might later become grounds for

political exclusion. If prior legal employment now has new political consequences, the state effectively imposes penalties for conduct that carried no such consequences at the time it occurred.

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The broader consequence of this law is that Georgia's modern reform-oriented professional class, which has largely developed through civil society institutions, donor-supported programs, think tanks, policy organizations, governance initiatives, independent media, and democratic advocacy projects, is fully disenfranchised of its political rights. By creating legal disincentives to engaging in these sectors, Georgian Dream narrowed the pool of future political actors capable of entering public life. This is, in turn, exploited by government propaganda, which dubs all opposition actors as "old faces" and "remnants of the UNM regime."

## Removing Voters Without Removing Voting Rights

The narrowing of political participation does not affect only citizens seeking office. The same logic increasingly appears on the other side of democratic representation, among citizens acting as voters themselves. Recent legal changes affecting Georgian citizens abroad have made it practically impossible for them to exercise their electoral rights.

***Rights that require significant financial means and logistical capacity are no longer universally accessible rights.***

In December 2025, Georgian Dream [adopted](#) a new Election Code under which polling stations for parliamentary elections would be opened only inside Georgia. Georgian citizens residing abroad formally retained their constitutional right to vote, but could exercise it only by physically returning to Georgia on election day. Requiring hundreds of thousands of emigrants scattered across Europe, North America, and elsewhere to purchase flights, take leave from work, arrange documentation, and return to Georgia for a single day of voting effectively transforms participation into a resource-dependent privilege. Rights that require significant financial means and logistical capacity [are no longer](#) universally accessible rights.

During the 2024 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream reportedly received only around 13% of votes cast abroad, compared with approximately 54% in the official nationwide result. The Georgian diaspora has consistently exhibited political preferences that differ significantly from domestic patterns and has generally shown stronger support for opposition parties and European integration policies. Against this background, the elimination of practical voting opportunities abroad is nothing but a targeted restructuring of the electorate for the next national elections.

The measure also carries a deeper political message. Georgia's migrant population occupies a unique position within the country's economic and social landscape. For years, remittances sent from abroad have supported thousands of households and represented an important component of economic stability. Citizens who left Georgia because of unemployment, economic insecurity, or limited opportunities remained connected to the country financially and socially. They contributed economically while maintaining political interests in Georgia's future. Yet the current approach suggests a distinction between economic usefulness and political legitimacy – a phenomenon that we [have explored](#) on these pages before.

## Eliminating Political Alternatives Through Constitutional Mechanisms

Restrictions on passive electoral rights and the practical narrowing of voting rights abroad affect individual citizens. However, a parallel process targeting political organizations is just as, if not more, concerning. In October 2025, Georgian Dream [initiated](#) a constitutional lawsuit seeking to prohibit the United National Movement, the Coalition for Change, and Lelo–Strong Georgia. Following the formation of a broad Opposition Alliance comprising seven political parties, Georgian Dream [announced](#) that it had added the Federalists to the list of to-be-banned parties.

The GD representatives justify this move by invoking the concept of “defensive democracy,” arguing that these parties pose threats to the constitutional order and democratic institutions. Indeed, democratic systems do recognize this concept; in European constitutional traditions, political party bans are primarily intended to prevent political actors from using democratic institutions to destroy democracy itself. Political parties advocating violence, undermining constitutional order, promoting war, or actively seeking to dismantle democratic institutions may become subject to prohibition procedures. The threshold, however, has traditionally been intentionally high because banning political parties directly interferes with pluralism and political representation. In the Georgian Dream’s case, the threshold (and a very low one) was set by an unconstitutional Parliamentary Commission, which this journal has written about [in detail](#).

The implications of a possible party ban are substantial because the parties targeted in these proceedings are not marginal organizations operating at the fringes of political life, as is often the case in other European countries. According to the official 2024 election results, the parties affected by the looming prohibition collectively [accounted](#) for a significant share of Georgian voters and parliamentary seats.

Eliminating them would therefore not merely affect party structures. It would directly affect hundreds of thousands of citizens whose political preferences would lose organized representation.

## The Rising Cost of Political Leadership

The narrowing of electoral rights and political alternatives has been accompanied by another development that is increasingly reshaping Georgia’s political landscape: the growing personal risks associated with political leadership itself. Democratic systems assume that political competition involves reputational costs, electoral losses, and public scrutiny. In normal circumstances, opposition leaders challenge governments, and governments challenge opposition leaders. Yet democratic competition begins to change character once legal pressure, criminal prosecution, and imprisonment become recurring features of political participation. And this has now become a typical trait of Georgian politics.

The most internationally visible case remains that of Mikheil Saakashvili, founder of United National Movement (UNM) and the 3rd President of Georgia. Already serving sentences linked to earlier convictions involving abuse of office, illegal border crossing, and embezzlement allegations, Saakashvili last year [faced](#) additional proceedings involving accusations of attempting to undermine constitutional order and broader charges connected to alleged destabilization efforts. Regardless of public attitudes toward Saakashvili himself, his case is only one element of a much wider pattern. A Chairman of the UNM’s political council, Levan Khabeishvili, was [arrested](#) following public calls for mobilization around the October 4, 2025, demonstrations and after promising financial compensation to police officers or special task personnel who refused illegal orders or disclosed information. Authorities used these statements to charge him with bribery and later linked them to broader allegations involving sabotage and anti-state activity. On May 21, 2026,

Khabeishvili [received](#) a prison sentence of two years and six months.

Giorgi Vashadze of Strategy the Builder [was sentenced](#) to prison after refusing to testify before the parliamentary investigative commission established by Georgian Dream. Later, he became one of several opposition figures [facing](#) broader accusations involving sabotage and assistance to foreign actors. Nika Gvaramia, Zurab Japaridze, and Nika Melia, three leaders of the Coalition for Change, also [received](#) prison sentences for refusing to cooperate with the same commission and subsequently became associated with additional proceedings for sabotage against the state. Nika Melia's prison stay was then [extended](#) because of alleged contempt of court. Helen Khoshtaria, also from the Coalition for Change was imprisoned and [sentenced](#) for damaging the ruling party's campaign materials.

Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze of Lelo-Strong Georgia also [received](#) prison sentences and temporary prohibitions on holding public office following similar refusals to participate in commission proceedings. They were [sentenced](#) in 2022, as well, though not jailed.

**Citizens considering political careers increasingly confront a landscape in which political leadership may entail not only electoral risks but also legal issues, repeated summons, financial penalties, detention, asset restrictions, or criminal proceedings that extend over several years.**

Again, the significance lies less in individual legal cases than in the overall political environment these cases collectively create. Citizens considering political careers increasingly confront a landscape in which political leadership may entail not only electoral risks but also legal issues, repeated

summons, financial penalties, detention, asset restrictions, or criminal proceedings that extend over several years.

As is known, political systems shape behavior through incentives. If entering politics becomes associated with increasing legal vulnerability, the effect extends beyond existing opposition leaders. Potential future leaders also observe these developments. Professionals, academics, civic activists, business figures, and younger generations considering public life begin calculating not only the political costs of participation but also the personal consequences attached to it.

The cumulative effect resembles a form of political deterrence. Formal restrictions on candidacy remove some actors from the field. Restrictions on voting remove others. Pressure against political parties narrows organizational alternatives. Criminal proceedings against visible leaders increase the cost of participation for those who remain. And together, this is the disenfranchisement - Georgian style.

## Turning Civil Society into a Political Suspect

The architecture of political exclusion in Georgia increasingly extends beyond voters, candidates, parties, and political leaders. Civil society organizations, independent media, election observers, advocacy groups, think tanks and policy organizations constitute the connective tissue between citizens and political institutions. Weakening these actors does not simply affect NGOs as organizations, but society's overall ability to participate politically.

Over the past two years, Georgian Dream has increasingly blurred the distinction between civic activity and party-political activity. The practical consequence of this shift has been devastating for the public sphere. Activities that previously clearly fell within the sphere of civic engagement are now increasingly viewed through a political lens, making

organizations and activists vulnerable to regulatory scrutiny, investigations, financial restrictions, and legal sanctions.

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The process became visible before the broader legislative packages of 2025–2026. In September 2024, the Anti-Corruption Bureau [classified](#) prominent civil society actors, including Transparency International Georgia (TI Georgia), its Executive Director Eka Gigauri, and the civic initiative Vote for Europe, as organizations with a “declared electoral objective,” effectively subjecting them to legal provisions designed for political actors rather than civil society organizations. Officially, the decision was justified by allegations that these organizations had become involved in electoral processes.

The significance of this decision extended far beyond the organizations directly affected. It effectively introduced a new practical principle: civic activity that produces political consequences may increasingly be treated as political activity itself. With this approach, election observation, human rights advocacy, anti-corruption investigations, public criticism of government policies, voter mobilization campaigns, and open support for Georgia’s European integration can shape political behavior and influence political outcomes. Once influence itself becomes a sufficient criterion, almost any meaningful civic activity could be subject to state intervention.

The legislative changes adopted in 2026 expanded this logic considerably. The restrictive package [introduced](#) by Georgian Dream in 2026 tightened foreign funding regulations, expanded state oversight mechanisms, imposed restrictions on external lobbying activities, and broadened state authority over political participation. International organizations and rights groups warned that the package increasingly treated ordinary civic activities as potential political or security threats. Human Rights Watch [argued](#) that these changes risked criminalizing activities traditionally regarded as core elements of civic participation, including advocacy work, public campaigning, and policy engagement. Similarly, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights [warned](#) that the package was built upon earlier restrictive legislation adopted since 2024 and contributed to a progressively shrinking civic space in Georgia.

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The chilling effect may ultimately become the most significant consequence of these laws. Repression does not necessarily require mass arrests or the formal closure of organizations. Legal uncertainty itself can become a highly effective mechanism of control. Citizens and organizations may increasingly avoid advocacy work not because it has been explicitly prohibited, but because the legal and personal costs associated with such activities become uncertain and potentially severe.

## **Criminalizing Protest and Hollowing Out Freedom of Expression and Assembly**

The process of political disenfranchisement in Georgia extends beyond voting rights, candidate

eligibility, party restrictions, and pressure on civil society. It increasingly reaches one of the most fundamental elements of democratic participation itself: the ability of citizens to express political views publicly, gather collectively, and challenge power between elections. In democratic systems, elections do not constitute the entirety of political participation. Citizens cast ballots periodically, but democratic life functions continuously through speech, criticism, mobilization, assembly, and protest. Demonstrations, rallies, public gatherings, and symbolic acts of dissent are not peripheral elements of democracy; they are integral mechanisms through which citizens communicate political demands and influence public debate.

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Over the past two years, Georgian Dream has also targeted this sphere. Rather than banning protests outright, the government has pursued a strategy of gradually increasing the costs of political participation and *de facto* [abolishing](#) these freedoms. Through successive amendments to the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations, the Administrative Offenses Code, and the Criminal Code, the state has transformed ordinary protest activity into conduct that carries significant financial and legal risks.

The first substantial wave of changes emerged following the large-scale demonstrations against the foreign influence legislation and later anti-government mobilization campaigns. Amendments adopted in late [2024](#) and early [2025](#) significantly increased penalties for a broad range of protest-related activities. International organizations expressed concern regarding both the substance and proportionality of these measures. The Venice Commission [noted](#) that the amendments substantially increased sanctions

and administrative penalties related to assemblies and demonstrations. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights similarly [expressed](#) concern regarding the use of administrative detention for assembly-related activities and recommended substantial reductions in financial penalties.

The practical impact of these changes is already considerable. Administrative fines for violations of assembly rules increased dramatically. Fines for certain protest-related activities increased from GEL 500 to GEL 5,000, while administrative detention of up to 15 days remained available across a broad range of conduct associated with demonstrations. Restrictions were also expanded regarding the use of temporary structures, the blocking of entrances, the use of various protest objects, and other activities routinely observed during public demonstrations. The October 2025 legislative package intensified the crackdown. Georgian Dream introduced additional amendments to both the Administrative Offenses Code and the Criminal Code, expanding detention powers and introducing criminal consequences for repeated administrative violations. Perhaps the most draconian, yet symbolic, illustration emerged in relation to sidewalk protests. Following earlier restrictions concerning road blockages, demonstrators adapted their tactics by moving protests onto pavements and pedestrian areas. Authorities responded by changing the legal framework once again. By May 2026, several dozen peaceful demonstrators [received](#) administrative detention sentences after participating in protests on sidewalks.

## **Paradoxically, Elections Still Matter**

Elections, nonetheless, remain essential. No meaningful political change in Georgia can realistically emerge outside an electoral process. The October 4 2025 shenanigans clearly demonstrated that change in Georgia can only happen through elections, not revolution, just as the last two years

of incessant protests demonstrated that change cannot happen through peaceful street protests. But how can you win the elections when the playing field is uneven, and the football pitch is tilted in favor of the incumbent?

This question is currently impossible to answer, even though possible opposition [strategies](#) and the [examples](#) of Hungary and Moldova suggest certain contours, and this journal has extensively covered it beforecovered it before, while Shota Gvineria addresses the topic in the current edition.

What is clear, however, is that domestically, opposition parties face a strategic dilemma. They must decide whether participating in future elections under current conditions would legitimize an unfair process and dictatorial-leaning, yet isolated regime, or whether refusing to participate risks further marginalization and annihilates any chance of peaceful democratic transition. So far, opposition actors have increasingly framed participation not as an unconditional decision but as one dependent on the restoration of basic democratic conditions. Opposition actors have [publicly argued](#) that meaningful participation requires the release of political prisoners, the end of politically motivated prosecutions, the restoration of a competitive political environment, and the creation of conditions for genuine electoral competition. Notably, these demands no longer concern technical election administration. They concern the broader political environment preceding the elections themselves.

The international community has also increasingly recognized that the challenge extends beyond election day procedures. Nearly all major demands raised by international partners ultimately concern the electoral environment and the broader democratic framework surrounding it. The Moscow Mechanism's report encapsulates this broad consensus in the best possible way. This is why the

findings of the Moscow Mechanism report should be [incorporated](#) into a broader pressure framework on Georgian Dream. Recognition, normalization, diplomatic engagement, or political rehabilitation should not become detached from democratic conditions on the ground.

This convergence of messages from inside and abroad creates an important momentum. Domestic and international pressure on Georgian Dream increasingly needs to focus on the conditions under which future elections are conducted, whenever they take place. And the conditionalities that the West possesses, or may possess, especially after the removal of the Hungarian veto in Brussels, need to focus on this topic.

Any meaningful normalization of relations with the GD from the West, or internally, should come only after the reversal of the legal and political measures that increasingly disenfranchise large segments of Georgian society. The draconian legislation restricting political participation should be repealed. Political prisoners should be released. Opposition parties should remain free to operate without threat of prohibition. Electoral legislation should be reformed to restore meaningful competition.

These conditions reflect what this journal previously [described](#) as the four Rs: Refusal to ban parties, Repeal of the laws, Release of the prisoners, and Reform of the Electoral legislation. Without them, future elections may preserve the appearance of democratic procedure while increasingly losing the substance that gives elections meaning in the first place. And this can only be achieved if internal and external pressure on the authoritarian rulers concentrates on these four Rs ■