



Feature Article
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Russia's Grip on Georgia: Will the Oligarch's Attempt to Move Georgia Away from the West Succeed?

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Following Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali post-2008, Georgia's sovereign integrity has been increasingly compromised, prompting the ruling Georgian Dream party to adopt a cautious approach towards Moscow. This shift has led to polarization within Georgian society, complicating its Euro-Atlantic integration. The country's reliance on Russian investment and trade has raised concerns about maintaining genuine independence. Russia employs various levers, including political manipulation, economic ties, disinformation campaigns, and likely interference in the parliamentary elections of 2024, in order to sustain its influence. Following these rigged elections, Georgia's turn away from the West and toward Russia intensified rapidly.

Russia's intensified aggression in the post-Soviet space, targeting Georgia, among others, has created significant security challenges for the country. Once viewed as a front line in resisting Moscow's revisionist policies, Georgia now needs a clear stance and unwavering commitment to its foreign policy



Protests in Tbilisi. (By DerFuchs, CC BY-SA 4.0.)

priorities. The outcomes of Georgia's democratic development and Euro-Atlantic integration will profoundly impact the region's future.

Georgia struggles to maintain sovereignty against pervasive Russian influence across its political, economic, and social spheres. Its strategic location between Europe and Asia complicates this

relationship, requiring careful navigation. This paper examines Russia's major levers of influence over Georgia and their implications for security, political dynamics, and socio-economic development.

From Normalization to the Threat of War

After the August War in 2008, Russia occupied the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, fundamentally altering Georgia's security landscape. This occupation suspended all formal and informal relations, limiting Russia's means to influence Georgia. Its remaining tactics included provocative actions along the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) and expressing discontent over Georgia's Euro-Atlantic ambitions.

Against this backdrop, the victory of the Georgian Dream party in the 2012 parliamentary elections – led by an oligarch who built his fortune in Russia and maintained strong ties with Moscow – along with the ruling party's decision to normalize relations with Russia, offered Russian elites a renewed opportunity to regain influence over Georgia's domestic and foreign policies.

The Georgian Dream Party initially advocated for normalizing relations with Russia without compromising Georgia's interests. However, public discourse soon shifted toward “not provoking” Russia, with official statements increasingly emphasizing the need to avoid war and confrontation with Russia. This shift

from normalization to caution has raised questions about its effectiveness.

Political Leverage: Aligning Elites with Moscow's Interests

In Georgia, political dynamics are shaped in part by a struggle between pro-Western and pro-Russian forces, with Moscow's influence evident in various parties and movements. Some political elites, particularly in the ruling Georgian Dream party, have been criticized for prioritizing economic ties with Russia over democratic values. This stance poses a challenge to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and also risks fostering a false sense of a new normal regarding Russia's occupation of Georgian territories.

The political landscape in Georgia is complicated by public sentiment, which remains largely pro-Western. Despite this, the political elite's diverging interests have led to tensions within society, reflecting a deep-seated ambivalence towards Russia. Instances of Russian-sponsored political activities, including the funding of pro-Russian parties and the promotion of narratives that downplay Russian occupation, have sown division among the electorate. The ongoing political discourse often oscillates between advocating for European integration and acknowledging the economic realities of dependence on Russian trade and energy supplies.

After Georgia's designation as an EU candidate, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, *de facto*

head of the government and Honorary Chairman of Georgian Dream, formally returned to politics by late 2023. The ruling party swiftly pushed legislative changes obstructing EU integration, including reintroducing the contentious Russian-style "Foreign Agents" law. This move, contradicting Georgia's European aspirations and fueling social polarization, aligns closely with Moscow's interests and appears as a direct response to Georgia's EU candidacy.

The ruling party's approval of the "Foreign Agents" law, despite strong domestic and international opposition, reflects the Georgian Dream's determination to curb dissent and promote Kremlin-style anti-Western ideology. This includes using pseudo-sovereignty rhetoric to justify the suppression of Western influences.

At a pro-government rally on April 29, 2024, Bidzina Ivanishvili intensified this rhetoric, claiming Russia's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine were provoked by a mythical "Global War Party." This group is also perceived as having a significant influence over NATO and the EU, potentially guiding their responses or policies toward Russia. Ivanishvili alleged that foreign-funded NGOs in Georgia are primarily "agents" working to undermine the nation, ultimately enforcing the Global War Party's agenda against Georgia's national identity and security. Moreover, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, in comments to the media regarding the Global War Party, stated that it

possesses a "decisive, critical influence over the official structures of the U.S. and the EU."

The rhetoric and actions of the ruling party are aimed at isolating Georgia from the democratic world, fully aligning with the Kremlin's anti-Western policy, and contributing to the creation of a region under Russia's exclusive influence.

Occupied Territories: Russia's Plans, Perspectives, and Instruments of Political Influence

The occupation of Georgian territories remains a significant lever for Russia to influence the internal situation in the country and shape its foreign policy priorities, primarily concerning European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The slowing of this integration process is often attributed to the alleged unattainability of the chosen foreign policy goals, which are viewed as unrealistic.

One of Russia's most effective strategies against the Georgian government is the potential for the *de jure* annexation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region. Moscow prioritizes the integration of Georgia's occupied territories, a point regularly emphasized in its

official policy documents.¹ In this context, full annexation seems to be the goal for the Tskhinvali Region, while discussions regarding Abkhazia focus on its potential membership in the Union State.² This has recently led to a revival of contacts between Minsk and Sukhumi.

Russia's aggressive policy in Georgia's occupied territories includes "borderization," a form of hybrid warfare involving the construction of barbed wire, border signs, and illegal barriers. These actions worsen humanitarian conditions, divide families, and infringe on human rights. In 2015, Russia erected illegal border signs in Tsitelubani, placing part of BP's Baku-Supsa oil pipeline within the occupation line.

Moscow uses human rights abuses against ethnic Georgians in occupied territories as another tool of influence. Russian forces impose severe restrictions on movement, illegal detentions, and violations of rights to life, safety, property, healthcare, and education in Georgian. Discrimination includes pressure to change ethnic identities or surnames, restrictions on farming, erasure of IDP traces, and destruction of Georgian cultural heritage. Violence against Georgian nationals has led to a series of fatalities.

On the international stage, Russia still tries to push the false image of itself as a mediator between conflicting parties. Currently, the Geneva Discussions – despite some institutional flaws – remain the only international mechanism mandated for conflict resolution. Operating under a status-neutral format characterized by so-called constructive ambiguity, participants exhibit critical differences in their positions. These discussions have produced no significant progress since 2009.

Major changes have nevertheless taken place in the Georgian government's approach to the conflict with Russia, not least as concerns the historiography of the 2007-8 war. On September 15, 2024, Bidzina Ivanishvili made remarks during the pre-election campaign at a meeting with voters in Gori, a city near the ABL with South Ossetia that was at the center of the Georgia-Russia war in August 2008. In a departure from all previous positions, he claimed that the war had been a "well-planned provocation from the outside against the Georgian and Ossetian people" carried out by the United National Movement, thus laying the blame squarely on the Georgian government and absolving Russia of any responsibility. He stated that if "Georgian

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," 2023. (https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/)

² "Bzhania: Abkhazia Ready to Join Union State of Russia and Belarus," Civil Georgia, August 26, 2022. (<https://civil.ge/archives/506089>)

Dream" wins the parliamentary elections on October 26, it would apologize to the Ossetian people.³

Paata Zakareishvili, former State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality under the Georgian Dream government, commented on this issue: "It is clear in this process that the Georgian authorities want to whitewash and clean up Russia's image.... Ivanishvili has fully adopted the Russian narrative. The sole goal of "Georgian Dream" is to maintain power while aligning with Russia's interests."⁴

Economic Leverage as a soft power tool

The invasion of Ukraine has reshaped the structure of Russian business activities in Georgia. Large private Russian enterprises, such as Beeline and Borjomi, had to formally exit Georgia, leading to an increased share of small and medium-sized enterprises. With 38 percent of foreign investments in Georgia originating from offshore zones, obtaining precise data on Russian oligarch involvement in the country is complicated. Between 2017 and 2021, Russian investments comprised approximately 5 percent of total FDI in

Georgia. However, in 2022, Russian FDI reached a record \$105.6 million, though it decreased slightly to \$103.3 million in 2023. Growing FDI from Russia has raised concerns among policymakers regarding Georgia's long-term economic independence. For example, real estate purchases by Russian citizens increased by 115 percent from 2022 to 2023. Analyzing Russian business in Georgia is further complicated by businesses registered under Georgian citizens who previously resided in Russia, yet these businesses often maintain strong connections to Russia.

In 2023 the (pre-declared) trade turnout between Georgia and Russia was \$2.39 billion,⁵ which is 47 percent more than in 2021 (before the invasion of Ukraine). Russia's share in Georgia's total trade turnout in three consecutive years were as follows: 11.4 percent in 2021, 13.1 percent in 2022, and 11.2 percent in 2023.⁶ This economic dependency poses risks, particularly for Georgian manufacturers who face increased competition from Russian goods in the domestic market, with approximately 39 percent of Georgian imports now originating from Russia.

³ "In Gori, Ivanishvili Blames Outsiders, UNM for 2008 War, Broaches Apology 'to Ossetian Brothers and Sisters'," Civil Georgia, September 14, 2024. (<https://civil.ge/archives/624195>)

⁴ Paata Zakareishvili, "Opinion: "Georgian Dream is not concerned with resolving conflicts; it wishes to improve Russia's image" JAM News, September 17, 2024. (<https://jam-news.net/ivanishvili-aligns-with-russias-interests-is-not-concerned-with-resolving-conflicts/>)

⁵ National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2023. (<https://www.geostat.ge/ka/single-archive/3412>)

⁶ Transparency International Georgia, "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Summary of 2023," February 16, 2024. (<https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-summary-2023>)

The energy sector is a well-known ground for Russian influence in Georgia. The country relies entirely on imported petroleum products from diverse sources, with supplier shares fluctuating based on price and supply shocks.⁷ To mitigate risks and minimize the negative supply shock, the European Energy Community issued a directive mandating Georgia to create a strategic reserve of petroleum products.⁸ However, the Georgian government hasn't taken sufficient measures in this regard, which creates certain risks for the security of the petroleum products supply. The strategic reserve provides one of the most credible guarantees to stabilize the price during the crises.

In 2023, imports of petroleum products from Russia decreased by \$70 million (-11 percent) but have quadrupled since 2021. This decline was influenced by Russia halting fuel exports from September 21 to November 17 and rising fuel prices. Historically, trade in petroleum products with Russia has faced corruption issues, notably involving Lukoil, which secured GEL 200 million in Georgian state contracts from 2010 to 2022. Allegations also

surfaced regarding Lukoil Georgia's corrupt activities, which blocked fuel transportation to Armenia.⁹

Additionally, Georgia is entirely dependent on liquefied propane gas (LPG) imports from Russia, as it is preferred for its quality and pricing, further increasing Georgia's reliance on Moscow.

The price of natural gas imports from Russia has been increasing. In 2023, Georgia imported \$131 million worth of natural gas from Russia, compared to \$112 million in 2022, \$77 million in 2021, and \$36.9 million in 2020.

Until 2016, Georgia received 10 percent of Russia's natural gas transiting through its territory. Since then, "Gazprom Export" has paid the transit fee in American Dollars, though the exact price of additional imported gas remains classified as a commercial secret. As a result, it is challenging to determine the precise share of Russian natural gas in Georgia's energy sector. However, given that its primary consumer is industry, any limitations in the supply of Russian gas are unlikely to have a significant impact on the population.

⁷ Ministry of Economy of Georgia, "sakartvelos sakhelmts'ipos energet'ik'uli p'olit'ik'a," [Energy Policy of the State of Georgia] October 2023. (https://www.economy.ge/uploads/files/2017/energy/2023/energetikisa_da_klimatis_integrirbuli_gegmis_garemosdacviti_shefasebis_angarishi_20_10_23/1_sakartvelos_saxelmwifo_energetikuli_politika.pdf)

⁸ Energy Community, "Annual Implementation Report 2023," (<https://www.energy-community.org/>)

⁹ Giorgi Papava and Levan Tevdoradze, "sakartveloshi rusuli biznes mplobelobis pakt'orit gamots'veuli risk'ebis k'vleva" [Russian Business in Georgia – A Study of the Risks Posed], Tbilisi State University, International School of Economics, Policy Institute, November 2023. (<https://iset-pi.ge/storage/media/other/2023-12-14/529c2dc0-9a60-11ee-98f7-79316d542ff2.pdf>)

Interestingly, Georgia was unable to build a facility for accumulating a strategic gas reserve. The large portion of finances (approximately Eur. 120 mln) allocated by the European institutions – the German Development Bank (KfW) and the European Investment Bank (EIB) – for building the facility had been spent to fight pandemics.¹⁰ Based on the EU request, the building of the facility was rescheduled by 2025. Georgia is the only country in the region without strategic gas reserves, posing significant challenges in the event of unexpected disruptions in gas supply. This includes potential reductions in supply from external sources during peak consumption periods and difficulties in balancing seasonal consumption fluctuations.

Georgia's dependence on Russian electricity is minimal, with Russia accounting for only 0.1 percent of Georgia's total electricity consumption (excluding occupied territories) in 2023. Companies such as Telasi and Telmico play critical roles in electricity supply, with Telmico controlled by Inter RAO, a sanctioned Russian state-controlled company. Corruption risks are evident in electricity import and transit, highlighted by joint ventures between

former officials and Russian firms that have raised concerns about accountability.¹¹

Russia's interest in restoring transport connections with Georgia was highlighted during a Georgia-Russia Business Council meeting on September 19, 2023, where advocates called for the restoration of railway and road links through occupied regions. Despite official denials, discussions have occurred regarding the implementation of a 2011 customs agreement to monitor trade, including with occupied territories.¹² The potential restoration of railway connections remains a topic of concern for Georgian policymakers.

Sanctions Imposed on Russia and Evading Mechanisms

Since sanctions were imposed on Russia, Georgia has navigated a complex landscape regarding its economic ties. In 2014, the Georgian government made a controversial decision to join only Crimea-related sanctions against Russia. In 2022, the government's decision not to join the anti-Russian sanctions at all, despite the annexation of Ukrainian territories, was even more inconsistent. This

¹⁰ "Georgia redirects 180 mln euros in funding intended for infrastructure development to counter pandemic," JAM News, September 11, 2020. (<https://jam-news.net/georgia-german-development-bank-covid-19-gas-storage/>)

¹¹ Transparency International Georgia, "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia Continues to Grow: January-June 2023," September 29, 2023.

(<https://transparency.ge/en/post/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-continues-grow-january-june-2023>)

¹² Irakli Sirbiladze, "Russian-Georgian WTO Agreement: Actors and Factors Influencing its Practical Implementation," Georgian Institute of Politics, August 2019. (<https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Research-Paper-10.pdf>)

policy is officially explained as necessary to ensure the national interests and sustainable economic development of Georgia.¹³

This has led to concerns from the U.S. State Department regarding potential sanctions evasion, as there has been an increase in goods entering Russia through Georgian channels. Recent legislative changes allowing asset transfers from offshore zones have further raised suspicions about Georgia's role in facilitating sanctions evasion.

While many sectors have benefited from increased trade and remittances, Georgian authorities face challenges in balancing international obligations with domestic economic interests. A survey conducted by the National Bank of Georgia revealed that 60 percent of businesses reported increased demand for their products due to Russian sanctions. However, Georgian exporters fear repercussions from international partners for their engagement with the Russian market.

Russian Economic Influence over Georgia: Myth or Reality?

Georgia's economic dependence on Russia appears to be increasing but is not currently alarming. Nevertheless, dynamics due to government policies may lead to a dangerous level of dependency. Ownership of critical infrastructure by Russian entities increases risks that require monitoring.

Disinformation and propaganda regarding Georgia's economic overdependence on Russia require special attention. Pro-Russian political forces, public groups, and business circles openly advocate for the leading role of Russia in ensuring the country's economic stability. This narrative is used to justify Georgia's opposition to joining sanctions against Russia. The Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, stated that restricting economic cooperation with Russia would halt economic development and damage Georgia.¹⁴

Intelligence Penetration and Soft power tools

The influence of Russian intelligence services in Georgia is pervasive. Reports suggest that the Federal Security Service (FSB) maintains

¹³ "sakartvelo ar uertdeba rusetis ts'inaagmdeg sanktsiebs - irak'li Gharibashvili", [Georgia Will Not Join the Sanctions against Russia – Irakli Gharibashvili] *Radio Tavisupleba* (Radio Liberty), February 25, 2022. (<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31722610.html>)

¹⁴ "k'akha k'aladze - chveni kveq'nis int'eresebidan gamomdinare ar vuertdebit sanktsiebs da q'oveltvis es

damok'idebuleba gvekneba," [Kakha Kaladze: Based on the interests of our country, we do not join the sanctions and we will always have this attitude] 1tv.ge, November 22, 2023. (<https://1tv.ge/news/kakha-kaladze-chveni-qveynis-interesebidan-gamomdinare-ar-vuertdebit-sanqciebs-da-yoveltvis-es-damokidebuleba-gveqneba/>)

close ties with certain elements within Georgia's law enforcement and intelligence communities, undermining the effectiveness of Georgia's efforts to build a robust security framework. These ties facilitate Russian reflexive control mechanisms that manipulate Georgia's internal politics and security strategies, allowing Moscow to influence key decisions at critical moments.

Georgia's experience with cyberattacks attributed to Russian operatives further highlights this issue. Cyber operations targeting government institutions, media outlets, and civil society organizations have created an atmosphere of insecurity and fear, impeding the development of a cohesive national strategy against such threats. For instance, the 2019 cyberattack on the Georgian government, which saw thousands of websites compromised, was a stark reminder of the vulnerabilities that persist. Such cyber operations can destabilize political institutions, erode public trust, and create divisions within society.

Moreover, the spread of disinformation through social media platforms further complicates the security landscape in Georgia. Russian-backed campaigns seek to undermine the public trust in democratic institutions and promote narratives that favor Moscow's

interests. This creates a challenging environment for the Georgian government, which must not only contend with physical security threats but also the psychological and informational warfare that accompanies modern conflicts.

A group of investigative journalists known as "iFact" exposed 76 organizations operating on behalf of Russia, which publicly deny representing an occupying state while promoting Georgia's rapprochement with Russia.¹⁵

The focus of Russian propaganda is very much concentrated on the popularization of Russia through the promotion of the traditional, orthodox Christian concept of the "Russian World"; the establishment of effective instruments for political and economic influence, including the restoration of lost economic ties, increased economic dependency, and the promotion of corrupt practices aimed at creating influential Russian-oriented financial groups; the establishment of effective propaganda and disinformation systems; the increase of political supporters through financial, political, and propaganda instruments; the formation of pro-Russian political, public, and media organizations; and the breeding of public polarization while fueling potential crises.

¹⁵ iFact- Investigative Journalists Team, *Annual Report 2022*, 2023. (<https://ifact.ge/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/iFact-2022-Report-eng.pdf>)

Multiple Instruments for Pursuing a Successful Soft Power Policy in Georgia

Moscow operates a series of instruments to project power in Georgia.

Foundations and NGOs: With a limited diplomatic presence, Moscow has established numerous foundations, media outlets, and NGOs in Georgia. These entities allow Russia to gather and disseminate necessary information, analyze the situation, and, if necessary, implement instructions from Russian structures.

Shadow Financial Systems: There exists a shadow financial system utilizing various schemes to provide financial support to pro-Russian political parties, civil organizations, and Georgian-language media promoting Kremlin propaganda. These shadow funds are also used to interfere in elections.

The Russian Orthodox Church: The Russian Orthodox Church, essentially a state institution of Russia, is actively used by the Kremlin to promote its aggressive policies.

Troll Factories: Russian troll factories exploit social networks and electronic media to manipulate public opinion regarding political processes, including elections.

Economic Diplomacy: Pursuing proactive economic diplomacy, Russia primarily relies on state corporations or government-controlled private sectors. These business institutions are more flexible and, therefore, more preferable for the Russian government as

they are not bound by profit-making necessities.

Media Competition: The operation of Russian media outlets in Georgia, controlled and supported by the Kremlin, creates serious competition for national broadcasters.

Amidst the Russian information warfare, narratives aligned with Russian propaganda have emerged within the Georgian Dream and its affiliated political and public groups. Among these narratives, a few can be distinguished to illustrate how the Georgian Dream promotes the Russian message. These include blaming the former Georgian government for initiating the 2008 war or attempting to distribute responsibility between Russia and Georgia; the instrumentalization of the fear of war; accusations of possible Western interference aimed at overthrowing the government; and the promotion of “sovereign democracy” ideas that differ from Western perspectives, emphasizing traditional and family-oriented values.

In summary, Russia's multifaceted influence in Georgia manifests through political narratives, economic strategies, and disinformation campaigns, all aimed at fostering a dependency that undermines Georgia's sovereignty. These efforts not only exploit existing vulnerabilities but also promote a narrative that frames rapprochement with Moscow as beneficial for Georgia's future. Ultimately, Moscow seeks recognition of its hegemony in the post-Soviet area, viewing this

acceptance as a preliminary phase to its broader global revisionist agenda. In this context, the South Caucasus holds strategic importance for Russia, with the Kremlin considering the establishment of influence over Georgia critical for ensuring full control of the entire region.

Parliamentary Elections of October 2024

The 26 October 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia were widely criticized for significant irregularities that undermined their legitimacy. Independent election observers, including ISFED, My Vote, and GYLA, documented extensive violations during both the pre-election period and election day. Reports highlighted massive breach of vote secrecy, voter intimidation, manipulation of voter lists, ballot stuffing, and the expulsion of election monitors from polling stations. Additionally, organized groups outside polling stations were accused of collecting personal data and coercing voters, thereby compromising the integrity of the process.¹⁶

Despite these documented violations, the Central Election Commission (CEC) announced that the ruling Georgian Dream party had secured 54% of the vote. However,

opposition parties rejected these results, citing substantial evidence of electoral fraud. President Salome Zourabichvili also condemned the elections, characterizing them as a “Russian special operation” designed to derail Georgia’s aspirations for European integration. All four opposition parties that passed 5% threshold refused to recognize election results. This assessment triggered widespread protests across the country, with thousands demanding fair elections and greater transparency. Protesters have continued to gather in cities across Georgia, calling for new elections under international supervision.

Two U.S. pollsters, HarrisX and Edison Research, commissioned by Georgian opposition groups, raised doubts about the official results, asserting that the “final CEC election result that places the Georgian Dream party at 53.96% is, simply put, statistically impossible”.¹⁷ These findings have added further weight to allegations of widespread electoral fraud.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) identified frequent

¹⁶ Transparency International Georgia, “Joint Assessment by ISFED, My Vote, and GYLA: The 26 October Parliamentary Elections,” November 19, 2024. (<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/joint-assessment-isfed-my-vote-and-gyla-26-october-parliamentary-elections>)

¹⁷ HarrisX and Edison Research, “Election Results Analysis Report. Commissioned by Georgian opposition parties; HarrisX, “HarrisX Releases Final Georgia 2024 Exit Poll Analysis”, October 31, 2024. (<https://www.harrisx.com/posts/harrisx-releases-final-georgia-2024-exit-poll-analysis>)

compromises in vote secrecy, procedural inconsistencies, voter intimidation, misuse of administrative resources, and an uneven playing field. These factors significantly undermined the integrity of the elections and eroded public trust in the democratic process¹⁸. Local observers, NGOs and opposition parties echoed these concerns, reporting systematic flaws, including violations of vote secrecy, widespread misuse of administrative resources, voter intimidation, vote buying, and issues with voting machines and voter lists. Despite opposition demands for the government to release the list of voters who participated, the authorities have so far refused to comply.

Western governments and institutions expressed concern, with calls for an independent investigation into alleged electoral fraud. The European Union announced plans to deploy a fact-finding mission to assess the situation. In contrast, only a handful of countries, including Hungary and Venezuela, welcomed the results. Russia's endorsement further aligned with narratives opposing Georgia's European integration. Kremlin spokespeople voiced approval of the elections, ironically accusing the West of interfering in Georgia's internal affairs.

The European Union has announced its intention to dispatch a fact-finding mission to assess the elections and their aftermath, reflecting widespread international apprehension. This investigation is expected to provide an impartial evaluation of the electoral process and its implications for Georgia's progress toward European integration.

Georgia's judiciary, under the influence of the current regime, is widely perceived as lacking independence, raising doubts about the prospect of fair legal judgments. However, an exceptional ruling by Judge Vladimer Khuchua of Tetrtskhara municipality supported a lawsuit filed by the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA). The court nullified results in 30 precincts after uncovering breaches of voter secrecy. Investigations revealed visible marker traces on the back of ballots and improper handling of ballots during their placement in vote-counting machines. This decision set a significant precedent amidst widespread allegations of electoral fraud but was later overturned by the Court of Appeals. Similar lawsuits filed by GYLA were dismissed by other courts, reflecting broader concerns over judicial impartiality.¹⁹

However, on 18 November 2024, President Zourabichvili filed a Constitutional Court

¹⁸ OSCE/ODIHR, "Interim Report on Georgia's Parliamentary Elections," October 11, 2024. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/578167>); OSCE/ODIHR (2024). OSCE/ODIHR, "Statement on preliminary findings and conclusions," October 25,

2024. (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/579346>)
¹⁹ Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), "Legal Challenges to the October 26 Elections,"

lawsuit to annul the election results. The lawsuit alleged violations of principles enshrined in the Georgian Constitution and international law, including universality, equality, secrecy of the vote, and the free expression of voters' will. This legal challenge, supported by election observer NGOs, argued that the election results were unconstitutional. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze dismissed these allegations, asserting that the new parliament would convene as scheduled on 25 November. He further announced plans to present his government for a vote of confidence.²⁰

The parliamentary elections and their highly contested outcomes have further deepened political polarization in Georgia, raising serious concerns about the country's democratic trajectory and its aspirations for European integration. The ongoing protests and legal challenges highlight the critical need for transparent and credible electoral processes to restore public trust in democratic institutions.

Conclusions

As this study was going to press, developments in Georgia took a dramatic turn.

On November 28, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced the Georgian Dream's decision not to put the issue of opening EU accession talks on the agenda until the end of 2028, as well as to reject any direct budgetary support from the EU.²¹ Georgian Dream thus explicitly announced a change in Georgia's foreign policy trajectory, and halted the EU accession process.

This sparked another wave of massive protests across Georgian cities. The ruling party, led by a Russian-made oligarch, has stalled EU integration following rigged elections. Protesters are now demanding new elections and a return to the European path.

The protests were met with extreme police brutality. Peaceful demonstrators were viciously attacked, beaten even after detention, chased in public spaces, arrested, and robbed. Journalists were deliberately targeted, with hundreds arrested and subjected to violence. The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, a prominent local NGO, issued a statement confirming that many of those detained were

²⁰ "Georgian parliament to convene amid president's continued opposition," Al Mayadeen, November 17, 2024.

(<https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/georgian-parliament-to-convene-amid-president-s-continued-op>); "Georgian PM to present Gov't

composition to Parliament for vote of confidence next week," agenda.ge, November 18, 2024. (<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2024/41650#gsc.tab=0>)

²¹ "GD Aborts EU Accession," Civil Georgia, November 28, 2024. (<https://civil.ge/archives/638801>)

severely beaten and subjected to inhumane and degrading treatment.²²

Georgian Dream's attempts to intimidate protesters and the wider society have backfired, further fueling outrage against the rigged elections, the government's anti-Western stance, and its pro-Kremlin policies. The protests have grown in both size and intensity, with hundreds of thousands taking to the streets daily in cities across Georgia. Hundreds of government employees have indicated their opposition to this u-turn, and numerous civil servants have resigned – including Georgia's ambassadors to the United States, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Italy, Czechia, and the Netherlands. The Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia have also imposed sanctions on GD founder Bidzina Ivanishvili and several high-ranking Interior Ministry officials, condemning the suppression of protests and reaffirming support for the Georgian people's European aspirations.

The standoff continues. Many are calling for targeted sanctions against those responsible for the brutal treatment of protesters.²³ The only way out of this deep political crisis is through new elections administered by a trustworthy authority—not the current Central Election Commission—along with an immediate end to violence against Georgian citizens and the release of political prisoners.

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²² "Watchdog Details "Inhuman and Degrading Treatment" Against Protesters by Police," Civil Georgia, December 3, 2024. (<https://civil.ge/archives/640792>)

²³ U.S. Helsinki Commission, "Co-Chair Senator Cardin, Ranking Member Wicker and John Cornyn stand with the Georgian people as they peacefully

defend their democratic & European aspirations in the face of violent repression by Georgian Dream," December 4, 2024. (<https://x.com/HelsinkiComm/status/1864093074986606967>)

