

Georgia's Decisive Choice

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On 26 October 2024, the country will hold a vital election that may shape its future trajectory. Georgia, long committed to European integration in the post-Soviet space and having made significant strides in that direction, now finds itself at a crossroads once again, either by choice or circumstance. This election will determine the new parliament's composition, which party will form the government, and crucially, reaffirm the nation's geopolitical orientation. Both the ruling party and the opposition agree on one thing: This vote amounts to a referendum on Georgia's future. The incumbent Georgian Dream party frames the choice as one between peace and conflict. In contrast, the opposition portrays it as a decision between aligning with Europe or Russia. This stark dichotomy has led to intense polarization as the country enters the campaign period. In this article, I aim to analyze the pre-election landscape in Georgia and explore why the 26 October vote has become an existential choice for the nation's future.

According to the 2017 constitutional amendments, the 2024 elections will be held on a fully proportional system, and parties and blocs that have received at least 5% of the vote will be represented in the parliament. If any party or bloc fails to secure at least 76 seats in the 150-member parliament, a coalition government must be formed. The registration of political parties at the Central Election Commission was completed on 30 August 2024, and 27 parties got the right to present their lists of candidates.

Pre-election balance of power

Partial concentration took place in the scattered and fragmented opposition camp and 3 electoral blocs were formed:

1. *Unity bloc*. This bloc was formed around the United

National Movement Party, whose founder and de facto leader is ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili. The other members of this alliance are the *Strategy Aghmashenebeli* and *European Georgia* parties, both of which previously separated from the United National Movement;

2. *Coalition for Change*. This bloc was formed around the *Ahali Party*, founded by Nika Melia, the former chairman of the United National Movement, and Nika Gvaramia, the famous journalist and founder of the Mtavari Archi TV channel. The other members of this bloc are *Droa* and *Girchi – more Freedom* parties;
3. *Strong Georgia*. This bloc was formed around the *Lelo for Georgia Party*, established by Mamuka Khazaradze, a businessman and the founder of TBC Bank. The other members of this bloc are *Freedom Square*, *For the People and Citizens*.

According to a 1-15 September [opinion poll](#) by Edison Research, all three opposition blocs clear the 5% threshold, with three additional opposition parties also in contention: *For Georgia*, created by former prime minister Georgi Gakharia, *New political center – Girchi*, and *the Georgian Labor Party*. This survey suggests the opposition could secure about 62% of the votes, potentially winning a parliamentary majority. In a significant move, President Salome Zurbishvili, who has emerged as a focal point of opposition within the government, introduced the [Georgian Charter](#) on 27 May, that is, at the Georgian Independence Day. This initiative, aimed at uniting the opposition around a pre-election roadmap, was [signed](#) by 17 political parties on 3 June, with the *For Georgia Party* joining on 23 September. Signatories have committed to forming a temporary neutral government if victorious, reversing laws that hinder European integration, reopening EU negotiations, passing reform legislation, and holding early elections under free and democratic conditions.

However, a bleaker picture for the oppositions has emerged

from a 24 July-4 August [survey](#) by the pro-government Gorbi center. This poll suggests Georgian Dream could secure about 60% of the vote, with the three opposition blocs that pass the threshold collectively garnering only about 25%. While controversial, these figures align with statements made by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the party's founder and honorary chairman, who [claimed](#) 60% popular support for Georgian Dream on 16 June. Party leadership has expressed ambitions not just to win, but to secure a supermajority. For context, Georgian Dream received approximately 55% of the votes in the 2012 elections at the height of its popularity, while official results (disputed by the opposition) show the party winning 48% in both 2016 and 2020.

Bidzina Ivanishvili's decision to lead Georgian Dream's [candidate list](#) underscores the critical importance he places on the upcoming elections. This unprecedented move—Ivanishvili has never before headed the party's electoral list—signals a shift in strategy. In his 16 July [speech](#) at the opening of the party's new headquarters, Ivanishvili framed the election as a referendum, contrasting peace with war, dignity with slavery, and progress with regression. He went so far as to call it a final and decisive battle. Ivanishvili portrayed the 26 October vote as the last stand for what he terms the “collective national movement,” which he accuses of being an arm of a “global war party” intent on destabilizing Georgia and potentially starting a war with Russia. Conversely, he positioned Georgian Dream as the guarantor of peace, stability, economic growth, national pride, and European aspirations, while promising an end to radicalism and polarization.

While Ivanishvili and his government continue to publicly endorse European integration – likely to appease the pro-EU majority among Georgian Dream supporters – their rhetoric and policies increasingly mirror those of Putin's Russia. This ideological shift is symbolically represented by the government's [decision](#) to erect a statue in Tbilisi honoring

Heraclius II of Georgia, who signed the 1783 Georgievsk treaty with the Russian Empire.

Risk of post-election civil conflict

In December 2023, Georgia achieved a significant milestone in its journey towards European integration when the European Union Council officially granted it candidate status for EU membership. However, the initial euphoria surrounding this achievement was short-lived. In March 2024, the ruling Georgian Dream party reintroduced a controversial draft law on foreign influence agents, which it had previously withdrawn after its first reading in parliament. This move prompted warnings from EU leadership that passing such legislation could jeopardize Georgia's EU membership process. Despite additional cautions from Washington about potential damage to the US-Georgia strategic partnership, the Georgian parliament [approved](#) the law in May 2024, and it came into effect in August of the same year. Further controversy arose on 17 September 2024, when the parliament passed another contentious piece of legislation, [an anti-LGBT law](#) ostensibly aimed at protecting family values and minors. Both these laws bear similarities to legislation previously enacted in Russia and are often referred to as *Russian laws* by opposition groups in Georgia. Government officials, however, maintain that these laws are necessary to safeguard Georgian national identity and moral values. Proposed [constitutional amendments](#) also seek to emphasize the special role of the Georgian Orthodox Church and recognize Orthodox Christianity as a foundational element of Georgian state identity.

The political climate in Georgia has become increasingly polarized, with the ruling Georgian Dream party, led by figures such as Bidzina Ivanishvili, Prime Minister Kobakhidze, and Tbilisi Mayor Kaladze, employing aggressive rhetoric in their election campaign. They present a stark, binary view of the political landscape, often branding opposition parties as traitors. The spirit of 1937-38 pervades

Georgian politics. This approach extends beyond just Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement to encompass other opposition groups, collectively labelled as part of a *collective national movement*. This divisive strategy has raised concerns about the potential for civil conflict. There are growing fears about the integrity of the upcoming elections. Some worry that if the voting results do not favor the current government, there might be attempts to interfere with the outcome. Government representatives have suggested that state power cannot be handed over to what they term as foreign agents and traitors. Moreover, the ruling party has [promised](#) to establish a court to prosecute the United National Movement and associated political forces (i.e., *collective national movement*), potentially declaring them unconstitutional. Given this context, there is skepticism about whether Georgian Dream would peacefully transfer power if it fails to secure a parliamentary majority, despite Georgia's experience with a peaceful transition through elections in 2012.

The current political climate suggests a potentially tense and volatile election period, with a real risk of serious civil unrest both during and after the elections.

Suspicion of collusion between Ivanishvili and Russia

On 20 August 2024, Georgian Dream elucidated the rationale behind their pursuit of a constitutional majority, revealing plans to amend the constitution for the purpose of restoring Georgia's territorial integrity. The party [proposed](#) altering the country's administrative-territorial division as a peaceful means to achieve this goal. In an address to voters on 31 August, Ivanishvili [emphasized](#) the need for maximum legitimacy to prepare for the peaceful restoration of territorial integrity at any moment. His subsequent speech in Gori on 14 September generated significant controversy. While blaming the 2008 war on Saakashvili's government, Ivanishvili announced plans for a Nuremberg-style process against the

collective national movement following the election, framing it as a prerequisite for Georgian-Ossetian reconciliation. He [declared](#) that “After all the perpetrators of the war are convicted and all those responsible for the violation of the Georgian-Ossetian brotherhood receive a strict legal assessment, we will find the strength to apologize for the treacherous National Movement putting our Ossetian brothers and sisters in harm’s way.”

All these developments have sparked suspicions of secret discussions and agreements between Ivanishvili and Russia. Given Ivanishvili’s well-known close ties to Russia—in which he amassed much of his wealth—these suspicions are not unfounded. The restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity through political-diplomatic means at this stage seems feasible only with Russia’s consent, which Moscow would grant only under conditions that maximize its interests. If presented with an opportunity to relinquish South Ossetia in exchange for greater influence over Georgia as a whole, Moscow might well seize the opportunity. It is plausible that the proposed changes to Georgia’s administrative-territorial structure, potentially including the reintegration of South Ossetia as an autonomous republic within Georgia (similar to its status as an autonomous province during the Soviet era), were discussed in these hypothetical secret dialogues. Notably, the Georgian government has remained silent about Abkhazia, a region of greater strategic importance to Russia due to its Black Sea access and the ongoing establishment of a Russian Black Sea Fleet base in the Ochamchira district.

The Putin regime’s known animosity towards Saakashvili suggests that the suppression of Georgia’s pro-Western opposition and civil society, including the United National Movement, might be among Russia’s conditions. If such a crackdown occurs following the adoption of the *Russian laws*, it could effectively terminate Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations. The establishment of a harsh authoritarian regime in Georgia would likely necessitate

Moscow's protection in the face of [expected](#) Western sanctions. Georgia's potential return to Russia's sphere of influence would significantly bolster Moscow's position in the South Caucasus. This shift could lead to the isolation of Armenia's current government, which has been gradually distancing itself from Russia and moving closer to the West.