

Georgia's Wavering Foreign Policy Amidst Upcoming Elections

Written by Zarina Burkadze

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/07/11/georgias-wavering-foreign-policy-amidst-upcoming-elections/>

ZARINA BURKADZE, JUL 11 2024

The Georgian Dream party came to power following the parliamentary elections in 2012, which was the first power transfer in the history of Georgia. As a coalition party, it concluded the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (2014–2016) and the Visa Liberalization (2017). Initially, it appeared to be a willing democratizer. Though, its recent authoritarian transgressions manifested in the adoption of a controversial law on “Transparency of Foreign Influence” (May 28, 2024). This Law aims to weaken local pro-democracy forces and insulate Georgia from democratic international pressures.

Georgia has always strived for joining the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since its independence. The rationale behind this Euro-Atlantic Integration was simple and straightforward – to contain Russian political and military aggressions, and to achieve economic growth and political stability through Western integration. The issue of territorial integrity was a leading factor for Georgia to align with NATO, while the EU integration was seen as the promoter of a democratic consolidation. The United States and the European Union collectively supported Georgia's statehood. Conversely, Russia attempted to undermine Georgia's statehood several times with its support for the separatist forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia during Georgia's early independence. These separatist conflicts resulted in the ethnic cleansing of Georgians and their internal displacement. Furthermore, Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008. Georgia's foreign policy has remained pro-Western since the country's independence and this was preserved in Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution. No prior government attempted to shift its Western orientation given that such a move was associated with high electoral costs. Yet in a puzzling move, Georgia's government, led by the Georgian Dream, took a risky decision by aligning with Russia.

The US, EU and NATO were important promoters of the Georgian democracy. Since its independence, Western democratizers collectively supported its state- and democracy-building projects, investing billions of USD dollars, and transferring knowledge on good governance. The Georgian government was willing to receive such democratic assistance. This openness is regarded as an important factor to achieving desired democratic outcomes. Reliable local partners represent internal pillars to avoid unintended consequences of international democratic assistance. Democracy promoters succeed in Georgia and elsewhere when they empower democratic veto holders within the political elites along with civil society and the media – three critical arenas essential for consolidating democracy and establishing the rule of law. However, the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influences indicated that the Georgian government prefers to cut political connections with the West by excluding such important veto players domestically.

The Georgian government has revealed ambiguity and stumbled on its European path. The October 2024 parliamentary elections will likely show what electoral cost this shifting foreign policy may entail for the ruling party. So far, Georgian Dream successfully uses rhetoric to instill fears by claiming that the Russia-Ukraine War can lead to the diffusion of regional war and destabilize Georgia. At this politically decisive moment, the Georgian government abstains from explicitly expressing a position, instead saying: “those who are not against us are for us” which can be translated as a tacit susceptibility to Russian authoritarian pressures.

Although Russia is engaged in its self-destructive war against Ukraine, it can still incite instabilities by using its

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proxies to pit opposing political forces against each other, and by diffusing its authoritarian policies abroad. Moreover, Russia has geopolitical motivations to disturb security in Georgia. Following the Russia-Ukraine War, the EU seeks secure economic and energy routes to minimize the negative effects resulting from EU's energy dependence on Russia that was a strategic mistake aimed at a temporal containment of Russia's authoritarian policies. Russian-incited instabilities aim at shaking regional peace and disrupting global economic routes. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor, connects China and Europe. Russia wants to limit this connectivity and maintain its advantage *vis-à-vis* China and Europe by strengthening its hold on the South Caucasus, which links the Caspian and Black Sea regions.

Similarly, Russia endorses Georgia's authoritarian shifts and attempts to counterweight international democratizing efforts by weakening pro-democracy forces and diffusing authoritarian norms – as well as supporting illiberal forces in power, who are unwilling to cooperate with Western actors. For example, the European Union granted Georgia candidate status in December 2023. Nevertheless, Georgia lagged Moldova and Ukraine that both started accession negotiations with the EU on June 25, 2024. It is also likely that Russia enhanced its authoritarian pressures on the Georgian government to sidetrack it from the European path. These transgressions can also be explained by the unwillingness of the Georgian ruling elites to comply with EU policies and limit their political powers for Georgia's Europeanization and subsequent democratization. This strategic decision gives impetus to Georgian citizens to escape from Russian influence and defend their value-driven democratic choice in the upcoming parliamentary elections of October 2024.

There are two domestic implications of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influences. First, it is anti-constitutional because it defeats the spirit of Article 78 of the Georgian constitution, which obliges constitutional authorities to take all measures in order to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the EU and NATO. Second, top EU and US officials denounced the adoption of the given law on the ground of its incompatibility with EU values and Georgia's declared strategic foreign policy objectives. The law disallows the political participation of pro-democracy forces and promotes their exclusion through their stigmatization as the label of foreign agent inflicts reputational damage upon civil society organizations and the media.

The current electoral setup and new regulations add complexity and uncertainty to the election in Georgia. Article 109 of the Election Code allocates parliamentary seats to political parties that secure at least 5% of the valid votes. Article 125 outlines the method for calculating the number of seats each party receives. Due to the high electoral threshold and these calculation rules, opposition parties are motivated to form coalitions to improve their chances of winning more seats. Article 76⁶ allows electronic voting using ballot papers with a barcode and a QR code, counted by an electronic voting machine, with results reported in real time. Therefore, domestic observers need thorough training to ensure the electronic voting machines comply with Georgia's electoral laws. These conditions prompted the Georgian Dream to reintroduce and pass the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influences, which they had previously withdrawn due to their electoral vulnerability.

Local non-governmental organizations scrutinize the election processes through their observation missions. This law is likely to constraint NGOs and media during the pre-election phase and on election day by imposing huge fines resulting in the seizure of their properties in case of their non-compliance. In the post-election setting, the Russian-inspired law can be used as an instrument of political bargaining for the Georgian Dream to build a coalition government. Its offspring parties and suspected satellites have fewer chances to overcome the 5% electoral threshold in the parliamentary elections. However, if the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influences is used to limit international observers the government puts at stake the legitimacy of the parliamentary elections and pushes the opposition to mobilize voters in the streets to defend democracy. It can be argued that under this condition Russia may think of either military intervention or empower its proxy parties to incite domestic unrests.

There are three main scenarios for the upcoming election. First, the opposition could win the majority and form the government if they strategically regroup, attract median voters, and downplay the role of former president Saakashvili, who is divisive. This requires a joint electoral list, regional campaigning, and strong leadership. The pro-European Opposition Front already promised to defeat the Georgian Dream and return Georgia on its European track and took its initial steps toward this goal with a pro-European declaration signed in Brussels on June 24, 2024. This

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scenario is however unlikely without the unity of opposition that also attracts the soft supporters of the Georgian Dream, disappointed by recent shifting foreign policy.

Second, the Georgian Dream will win the majority. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the Georgian Dream will win a simple majority due to widespread discontent and opposition from young voters. Despite using administrative resources, the party faces moral disadvantages from US sanctions and corruption scandals. Complete autocratization is improbable due to limited resources, potential backlash from cutting Western ties, and a popular demand for democracy, with 63% of citizens supporting a coalition government.

Finally, another scenario would see the establishment of a coalition government. Opposition parties may form two main groups, increasing the chances of a coalition government between the opposition and the GD. One group could include parties around President Zurabishvili's Georgian Charter and opposition parties split from the Georgian Dream, while the other could include the UNM and other aligned parties. Power-sharing with the Georgian Dream could be facilitated by EU accession talks and potential EU sanctions on authoritarian leaders. This scenario, however, might create instabilities but could also foster consensus-building and strengthen Georgia's democratic future.

About the author:

Zarina Burkadze is an associate professor of political science at Ilia State University Tbilisi, Georgia. She is a founding member and secretary general of the Georgian Association for Public Opinion Research, and author of *Great Power Competition and the Path to Democracy – The Case of Georgia, 1991-2020* (Rochester University Press, 2022). She received her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Zurich and was a Fulbright Postdoctoral Scholar at the Elliott School of International Affairs, IERES, George Washington University (2019-20). She was also a visiting scholar at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. Her research interests revolve around the topics of democratization, Europeanization, democracy, and autocracy promotion. She enjoys teaching and delivers courses on research design, political violence and democracy for bachelor, master, and doctoral level students.