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General elections in Georgia on 26 October 2024: a referendum on Europe?

The general elections in Georgia on 26 October will clearly determine the autocratic or democratic future of the country. President Salome Zourabichvili[1] considers [these elections to be a referendum](#) for a “European, democratic, independent Georgia, or a Georgia led by an authoritarian, isolated Russia”. Meanwhile, Georgian Dream, which holds a small majority in the Assembly and presents itself as ‘social-democratic’, is increasingly seen as Russia’s Trojan horse[2]. Led by Bidzina Ivanishvili[3], it appears to be implementing a strategy of systematically blocking Georgia’s accession to the European Union, despite its supposedly favourable label. The prospect of these elections appears to have accelerated this methodical undermining, especially since Georgia was granted candidate country status by the European Council in December 2023. On 9 October, at the start of the new legislature, the European Parliament adopted, [a resolution](#) by 495 votes, calling on the European Union and its Member States to hold to account and impose personal sanctions on all those responsible for undermining democracy in Georgia[4], including Bidzina Ivanishvili. The European Union has already [frozen 30 million € of the European Peace Facility](#).

of the pro-Kremlin legal arsenal, implemented by the ruling party, has been the adoption of a law called ‘*on the protection of family values and minors*’, which is part of the same strategy of systematically blocking the process of accession to the European Union since it defends a hateful vision of Georgian society. Finally, a discreet reform of the Penal Code allows disproportionate punishment - by way of example - of young people who appear a trifle too rebellious towards those in power.

This has been compounded by the attempt to banish all opposition to Georgian Dream, which currently holds a short majority in the Assembly with 76 seats out of 150. The main opposition party, the United National Movement, a centre-right party affiliated to the European People’s Party (EPP), was founded by former president of the Republic of Georgia [Mikheil Saakashvili](#), who is currently in prison accused of having provoked the war in South Ossetia in 2008[5]. All of this is contributing significantly to the feeling that Georgia has started along an authoritarian path under the leadership of the pro-Russian oligarch.

All of these texts passed by the Georgian Assembly provide the ruling party with additional tools to ensure that it remains in power. Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder of Georgian Dream, boasts of having a [fortune equivalent to 35% of Georgia’s GDP](#). Former Franco-Georgian Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration [Thornike Gordadze](#) writes: “*Georgian Dream is not a political party in the traditional sense of the term. It*

[1] Salomé Zourabichvili grew up in France and, after a career in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, entered politics in Georgia. Not affiliated to a political party, she became President of the Republic in 2018. Her election was [enabled at the time by the support of Georgian Dream](#).

[2] « [Le parti Rêve géorgien se montre sous son vrai jour, prorusse](#) », *Le Monde* 14 May 2024,

[3] Founder and Honorary Chairman of Georgian Dream and Prime Minister between 2012 and 2013.

[4] Admittedly, a resolution has no legal effect, but the diplomatic impact noted [in these pages](#) during the previous legislature, one might well imagine what will happen next.

[5] Speaking to journalists, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze confirmed that Georgian Dream plans to ban all political forces opposing it from the next general elections.

is a group of people united around the objective of staying in power from which they derive income and the protection of their capital. The party's main political orientations depend to a large extent on safeguarding the financial and personal interests of Mr Ivanishvili, who runs the party like a business and treats its members like employees." This analysis therefore explains the changing and volatile nature of the ideology and geopolitical orientation pursued by Georgian Dream. While business with the European Union seemed encouraging, it would appear that relations with the Kremlin are more promising for Bidzina Ivanishvili's financial affairs. The citizens who [captured the news in the spring of 2024](#) reject this view and are turning to Europe. EU Membership seems to be the only effective bulwark against an internal policy motivated solely by the largesse allowed by Moscow.

The forthcoming general elections are therefore of crucial importance for the country, both internally, in terms of respect for fundamental rights, and internationally, to the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. For Georgians favourable to the European Union, membership is above all an existential issue in the face of the threat of [the neighbouring former imperial power](#). The interweaving of economic and commercial interests with Russia gives weight to the pro-Russian elite, hence the difficulty of applying sanctions by the Georgian authorities and their relative ineffectiveness.

THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Most Georgians support their country's entry into the European Union and also NATO: the major events of 2023 and 2024, as well as the [polls](#) bear witness to this. This wish to be part of Europe is a long-term one. Over the last two centuries, the modern Georgian nation has been built on a sense of belonging to the European family[6].

Since this spring, the opposition has been working hard to achieve a resolutely European direction, despite the difficulty of creating a coalition force. 19 political parties submitted their lists of

candidates to the [Electoral Commission](#) for the first fully proportional elections, with a threshold of 5%, i.e. half as many parties as in 2020. These mergers have given rise to four pro-European opposition alliances, all of which have signed the President of the Republic's [Georgian Charter](#). This text dated 26 May 2024 commits those who sign[7] it to a year of technocratic government to push through the reforms needed to get back on the road to membership of the European Union. To a certain extent, the Georgian Charter setting the tone for the election campaign. President Salomé Zourabichvili, faced with the opposition parties' difficulties in reaching agreement, is placing, at her own risk, all of her bets on a shared European goal. This Georgian Charter, as a unifying document for the pro-European parties, underlines the vital importance of the forthcoming elections and calls for the full mobilisation of voters who disagree with the texts approved by the representatives of Georgian Dream.

The freezing of Georgia's application to join the European Union at the European Council meeting on 27 and 28 June, due to the adoption of the law on the transparency of foreign influence, provoked major uproar. It is important to remember that the status of candidate country was granted in December 2023, with great difficulty [and subject to strict conditions](#). The granting of candidate country status to Georgia [has presented Europe with a dilemma, as Régis Genté points out](#). "At the end of the year, the 27 members of the European Union must decide whether or not to grant the former Soviet republic the status of candidate country. Giving it candidate status would reward and strengthen a government that has every reason to believe it will continue its policy of breaking with the West. To deny it this status is to risk arousing popular anger that could have serious consequences." [8]

Events have proved Régis Genté right. By reintroducing the bill on foreign agents - a copy of [the Russian law](#) which obliges independent media and NGOs to declare themselves as 'foreign agents' if more than 20% of their activities are financed by

[6] Stephen Jones « [Socialism in Georgian Colors](#) », Harvard University Press, 2005, 410 p., Ronald Suny, « [The Making of the Georgian Nation](#) », Indiana University Press, 1994, 419 p.

[7] These parties are: For Justice, Green Party, Girchi-More Freedom and Droa, European Democrats, Aghmashenebeli Strategy, European Georgia, Republican Party, Ana Dolidze For the People, Ahali, Lelo for Georgia, Citizens, Freedom-The Way of Zviad Gamsakhourdia, United National Movement, Law and Justice, National Democratic Party, State for the People, and opposition MPs Khatia Dekanoidze, Nato Chkheidze, Armaz Akhvediani, Rostom Chkheidze, Tamar Kordzaia.

[8] It is no coincidence that the oligarch [Bidzina Ivanishvili made his political comeback in a short time, in January 2024 "to save Georgia". Did he ever leave it, since he always led the party and therefore influenced the government indirectly?](#)

non-national structures - Georgian Dream seems to want to present itself as all-powerful. It is constantly playing a double game, marking a hiatus between the European orientation of the Georgian people and its political 'elites' who take their orders from Moscow, with their campaign material including [the European Union flag and a banner](#) "Towards the European Union in peace, prosperity and dignity". It is difficult to see what is going on clearly.

Paradoxical as it may seem, in this month of October 2024, Georgia's application to join the European Union was submitted by the government, even though it is doing everything in its power to prevent membership. One example among many confirms the ambiguity that reigns in Georgia: [on 24 September last](#), the meeting between the Georgian Prime Minister and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Alain Berset, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly session, was widely publicised. The meeting discussed the 'fruitful cooperation' between Georgia and the Council of Europe, focused on the country's European integration and the Council of Europe's significant contribution to the implementation of reforms in Georgia. However, the situation has become a cause for concern in Strasbourg: [in a Declaration](#) adopted following an urgent debate on the situation in Georgia two weeks later, on 17 October, the Council of Europe Congress expressed 'its deep concern at the clear signs of democratic backsliding and the weakening of fundamental rights in Georgia, to a backdrop of increasing polarisation of society and the adoption of laws contrary to Council of Europe standards'. This context - punctuated by totally contradictory signs - [a sad reminder of that of Ukraine](#) in 2013, as pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich prepared to sign a cooperation agreement with the European Union.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF WAR

The election campaign began on 16 July, when Bidzina Ivanishvili inaugurated his party's new headquarters. He [raised the spectre of war](#), for which the opposition National Movement party is allegedly

responsible: "This will be a referendum between war and peace", he declared on this occasion. On 25 July, at a press conference devoted to rebutting the criticisms of its opponents, [the Parliamentary spokesperson declared](#) that the elections are 'the simplest choice between war and peace', adding that 'on 26 October, our citizens will have the simplest and clearest choice, because it is a one between war and peace, destruction and progress, and the party of war and the party of peace'. He concluded by playing on the fears of the public: "If the opposition manages to gain even a shred of power, Georgia will return to the chaos of war and destruction from which we saved the country". The aim is twofold: to play on the fear of past conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia - [zones of unrest that have become](#) "lawless areas that foster close relations between mafia and political life" - and to remove responsibility for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Georgian Dream claims to be neutral with regard to the war in Ukraine. This can be understood as a measure to avoid a second front opening up in currently occupied areas. However, the deep connections between oligarch Ivanishvili and the Kremlin raise questions, at a time when he is [accusing his Western partners of interfering in Georgian affairs](#) and portraying the West as a threat to Georgia's sovereignty. These accusations are revealing: an in-depth [inquiry](#) undertaken by [e-ifact-georgia](#) reveals how the Georgian authorities facilitate Russia's military supply chain, exporting dual-use items such as drones and processors. These actions clearly contradict Georgia's proclaimed neutrality and underline its complicity in supporting Russia's war efforts against Ukraine. The investigation also reveals Georgia's complicity in [Russia's circumvention of international sanctions](#). Despite the embargoes, dual-use items such as drones and computer processors continue to be shipped to Russia via Georgia[9].

At the end of September, the Russian Foreign Minister, [Sergei Lavrov, maintained](#) that Moscow was ready to help Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia normalise relations. According to Sylvie

[9] The investigation exposes a network of Georgian companies (some owned by Russia) that evade sanctions by falsifying documents to smuggle drones and electronic components into Russia. This complicity allows these illicit trade routes to continue, directly supporting Russia's war effort in Ukraine.

[Kauffmann](#), "Once again, the EU is faced with a dilemma: Should it rise to the geopolitical challenge and anchor Georgia to Europe to protect it from Russian influence, or should it refuse to compromise on democratic reforms, even if it means risking letting Georgia drift into Moscow's orbit?"

The appropriation of the war in Ukraine by Georgian Dream represents a clear break between Kyiv and Tbilisi. The new campaign banners around Tbilisi illustrate the [devastation wrought by the Russia's war](#) in Ukraine with the slogan 'Say no to war - choose peace'. In its statement, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry stressed that the Georgian people "need not fear a new war as long as Ukraine resists Russian aggression", adding that "the terrible price of this resistance is also the price of peace in Georgia". An example of dignity hailed by President Salome Zurbashvili on social networks.

Georgia is thus suffering from a painful rift between a ruling party that aligns itself with the Kremlin's vision of peace, society and the war of ideas, and an opposition prey to the reduction of every fundamental right hard won since the fall of the USSR.

FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AT STAKE

Freedom of opinion

The law on the transparency of foreign influence in Georgia - known as the 'Foreign Agents' Law' - aims to silence opposition to Georgian Dream. Organised civil society and the media, which operate outside the sphere of influence of the oligarch Ivanishvili, are largely supported by non-Georgian public and private actors. Record, publicise and monitor - which we can only imagine is [as intense as the law which has affected Russia](#) - clearly has a negative impact on freedom of expression and association. Any opinion dissenting from that of Georgian Dream must be curbed, particularly in the run-up to the general elections[10].

Even an international organisation as careful as the OSCE admits, [in its interim report](#) published on the

occasion of its electoral observation mission, that the adoption of the law is being used as a campaign tool and is an effort to discredit civil society and critical media in the run-up to the elections.

From the moment that some people have the means to organise public awareness campaigns, providing factual information to inform their electoral choices, calling attention to the fact that every ballot counts, and that collective individual action can precipitate electoral renewal, this constitutes a threat to the hegemonic power. The party in office seems to have understood - probably too late, hence its brutal response - that Georgian civil society cannot be perpetually manipulated by demonising the primary opposition. Georgians, especially young ones, are rallying behind democratic values and the European future of their nation. Their strong and conspicuous presence during the demonstrations against this 'foreign agents' law shows that the younger generation - who fear neither the government nor the Kremlin - support the development of empowered NGOs and independent media to promote a European-style democracy in Georgia. Unfortunately, some of them are paying a high price.

Proportionality of sentences

Failing to frighten people with the ghost of the Soviet menace, the party is setting an example. Omar Okribelashvili (19) and Saba Meparishvili (23) have unwittingly become symbols of the young pro-European resistance. Convicted in May for 'deliberately damaging' the iron fence near the Parliament building during the rallies, to the tune of around a hundred euros, they could face several years in prison. And yet, the families are prepared to answer for the "misdeeds" of their careless children by paying for the repairs, or even installing a new fence at their own expense. Opposition MPs and members of the public have launched a petition in favour of their release and have acted as guarantors. Unfortunately, the crime has become too serious as a result of the reform of article 187 of the Penal Code.

Adopted on 30 June 2023, this reform removes any possibility of a pecuniary sentence for material

[10] Tatia Tavkheldze, "The Rationale for Reintroducing the Foreign Agent Bill in Georgia before the 2024 Parliamentary Elections"

damage. The penalty is therefore necessarily imprisonment, and the term has been increased to six years. To this initial term, a further five years can be added for damage committed as part of a group. Ideal, then, to discourage any demonstrations, and the intense media coverage of the two young defendants is part of the campaign to undermine the opposition.

The NGO "[Social Justice Center](#)" points out that this penal reform was adopted without debate, either in Parliament or in the press. On the day it was adopted, all that was discussed was another reform relating to animal abuse. The way in which the bill was adopted is a further indication of the decline in the rule of law in Georgia, which has been perfectly organised to avoid political changeover.

THE RULE OF LAW AT STAKE

Despite the resources deployed to repress any opinion likely to cause harm to Georgian Dream, the resistance is holding firm. While the images of demonstrations dotted with European flags, day and night, have left their mark on us, the pre-existing tools of the rule of law have been put to good use and the aim now is to be able to maintain them.

On 5 August, press freedom organisations from all over the world [published a declaration](#) expressing solidarity with their colleagues in Georgia "as they face state-sponsored intimidation and a political attempt to silence them", and pledged their support. The statement said that the Georgian parliament was "trying to stigmatise" journalism with the "Russian law", which came into force on 1 August. These expressions of solidarity from outside the country are far from anecdotal: they are helping to put an end to voter apathy and frustration, explains the [German Marshall Fund](#). A new civil society has emerged, and it can communicate on the legal tools that can be used for resistance.

The appeals brought against the adoption of the Foreign Agents Act focus on Article 78 of the Constitution, which obliges all bodies to do their utmost to integrate the country into the European Union and NATO. The current constitutional question

is whether or not Article 78 takes precedence over Article 52, which requires the President of the Republic to obtain government approval for his diplomatic actions[11]. The difference of opinion is easy to understand: Georgian Dream has formed a government, and it seems obvious to it that Georgia's European ambitions cannot take precedence over what it considers to be its priorities. Faced with this, every citizen who wants to counter a policy led by a businessman who owes his fortune to Russia, has understood that European ambition is a tool that complies with the rule of law and basic fundamental rights.

On 17 September, [the spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) warned of the new law on 'family values and the protection of minors' in Georgia, which contains provisions that threaten a number of fundamental rights. This text imposes discriminatory restrictions on education, public discussions and gatherings linked to sexual orientation and gender identity.

President Salomé Zourabichvili refused to sign the text on the basis of Article 78, which would take Georgia even further away from the path towards the European Union. This did not prevent it from being adopted, but it is due to come into force after the election.

Georgian Dream has been in office since 2012. Twelve years on, the electoral period is unfolding in a climate of unprecedented, sustained tension. First, Parliament [abolished quotas](#) and financial incentive mechanisms for parties to include women candidates in elections, a sign of an initial message of defiance to the President of the Republic and the prelude of a move towards a retrograde Georgian society.

Following the constitutional reform of 2017, which ended the appointment of the President of the Republic by direct universal suffrage, the election is to be held by a 300-member college, after the general elections[12]. It is understandable that the aim is to eliminate the possibility of a significant counterweight - a female figure in the executive appointed by direct universal suffrage - to the party founded by the oligarch.

[11] "Challenges to Georgia's EU Integration: Is the Georgian 'Russian Law 2.0' contrary to the Georgian Constitution?", 2024.

[12] The President is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, represents the country abroad, makes certain appointments to the judiciary and holds the right of legislative veto. From 2024, the President will be elected by a 300-member electoral college made up of all the members of parliament and the supreme representative bodies of the autonomous republics of Abkhazia and Ajaria, as well as members of the representative bodies of local authorities.

All the legal solutions implemented have a single objective: to prevent political change and maintain the hegemony of Georgian Dream. They go hand in hand with the assumption that the Kremlin has every interest in keeping a man who made his fortune thanks to its influence at the head of a country in its zone of influence. Bidzina Ivanishvili therefore has no interest in promoting Georgia's accession

to the European Union. In contrast, the opposition parties are reluctantly going along with President Salome Zurbishvili's manoeuvres. It is hard to say whether this will be enough to win the election and bring about the changeover and, above all, the reopening of the process of Georgia's accession to the European Union that so many Georgian citizens seem to want.

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