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What direction will Georgia take?

Elise Bernard, PhD,
Head of Studies, Robert
Schuman Foundation, Paris



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A post-election analysis

What direction will Georgia take?

by Elise Bernard, PhD, Head of Studies Robert Schuman Foundation / civilian attendee, War College, Paris

Georgia currently finds itself in a complex situation, caught between its pro-western ambitions and the constraints imposed by Russia. The main scenarios and dynamics for its future seem contradictory, which radicalises positions and fosters fear and surprise.

Georgia as a former Soviet entity

Georgia declared its independence from the USSR on 9 April 1991, following widespread protests. This independence was soon accompanied by internal conflicts, particularly in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are ethnically more diverse, highlighting tensions that had been suppressed during the Soviet era. Between 1991 and 1993, confrontations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia led to the defeat of the government in Tbilisi and a declaration of independence by both territories. In response to Tbilisi's NATO aspirations, Russia increased its military presence in these regions, which have Russian populations, recognising their independence following the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict. This has also led to displays of military force, thereby further escalating tensions between the two countries. Today, these conflicts continue to influence Georgia's relations with both the west and Russia.

The Russian military presence has significant implications for Georgian politics. First, it limits Tbilisi's ability to regain control over these regions. Furthermore, the fear of escalating violence induces the government to adopt a low profile and accept limitations on its sovereignty over its own territory. Georgia still appears largely pro-EU; however, the ruling party, which has been in power since 2012 and which won the most recent elections, has effectively instilled the belief that any anti-Russian rhetoric is viewed as a stance favouring a return to conflict. Lastly, it is important to remember that although the fortunes of the founder of the Georgian Dream party are bolstered by intense trade relations with Russia, it is difficult to envision a challenge to the oligarchic model similar to what Ukraine has experienced.

Strategic perspectives

In the aftermath of the legislative elections held on 26 October 2024, the direction taken appears to favour the maintenance of the status quo, characterised by a frozen yet stable situation where tensions persist without the outbreak of open conflict. This precarious stability allows the Georgian authorities to avoid direct confrontation and maintain trade relations with

Russia. However, it has negative consequences both for the occupied regions and for the territory governed by Tbilisi. It is already evident that a wait-and-see approach carries risks, as it may render Georgia vulnerable to new Russian provocations. Moreover, the lack of action is generating frustrations among the Georgian population, which is seeking clarity regarding its necessary cooperation with Russia, the European Union, and NATO.

Heightened destabilisation

The intensification of Russian destabilisation in Georgia has become manifest through the exploitation of internal divisions within the country. On the ground, South Ossetia (pro-Kremlin, with military bases established there, and functioning as a Russian protectorate) may be viewed as an additional lever of pressure if violence in Abkhazia (which is not favourable to the Kremlin) escalates, assuming that the Kremlin still has sufficient personnel and resources to operate in this manner. In the immaterial realm, the Kremlin can still exacerbate political or ethnic divisions and foster an atmosphere of uncertainty by disseminating biased narratives that undermine citizens' trust in their institutions and fuel a divided public opinion.

This context helps explain why the Georgian Dream party is perceived as the least unfavourable option for Georgia's current situation. The party led by oligarch Ivanishvili promised throughout the electoral campaign – and continues to promise – that its actions shield the country from a new war with Russia while maintaining its candidacy for European Union membership. However, it is widely acknowledged that having candidate status with the EU does not guarantee accession, especially given that this hard-won status has yet to lead to the opening of accession negotiations. The outcome is far from certain, particularly if the Georgian government – which presents itself as seeking to appease the Kremlin – enacts legislation that aligns with Kremlin precepts and diverges from the requirements of the European rule of law, motivated by fundamental freedoms.

Dr Elise Bernard



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holds the position of Head of Studies of the Robert Schuman Foundation. Her research agenda is particularly devoted to EU enlargement, foreign defence and security policies. Specialised in European studies, she obtained her PhD in 2011 in public law from the Sorbonne University in Paris. Her dissertation on EU Law and post-Yugoslav states received an award from the Varenne foundation and was

published as a book (Librairie Générale de Droit et de Jurisprudence, Paris) in 2012. From then on, she has been a guest consultant for the Paris UNHCR office on asylum issues.

Encouragement of pro-EU ambitions

Since gaining independence, Georgians have sought to distance themselves from Russia, and a significant part of the population seems to believe that accession to the EU will ensure their democratic development, reflecting a pronounced sovereignty in the face of the Kremlin. EU membership has been a constitutional objective in Georgia since 2010, in response to the Rose Revolution. The first step was marked by an Association Agreement signed in 2014.¹ Furthermore, since 2017, Georgian citizens have been able to travel without a visa to the Schengen area for short stays, strengthening cultural and economic ties with Europe.

President Zurabishvili – who has been replaced by a President with an anti-Western tropism on 14 December 2024 in a controversial election process – has played a central role in this dynamic. While she occupied a – supposedly – symbolic position from an institutional standpoint, her international image reinforced Georgia's credibility with the European Union. The statements made by Charles Michel and Josep Borrell on 27 October 2024 regarding the accusations of fraud during the elections held on 26 October illustrate this.² The failure to open accession negotiations sends a clear message: the 27 are not prepared to negotiate with a government that has attempted to deceive them by withdrawing the “foreign agents” law to secure candidate status, only to subsequently adopt it and undermine NGOs that favour closer ties with the west.

Thus, a new election leading to the formation of a coalition government with representatives from parties other than Georgian Dream would maximise the chances of opening negotiations with the 27. Unfortunately, this scenario seems less likely than the first, especially as Prime Minister Kobakhidze is considering banning opposition parties. However, fostering an environment in which opponents of the oligarchic model continue to express their vehement dissent primarily exposes the instability of the current regime. This instability is concerning for the Kremlin, which helps explain Russian foreign minister Lavrov's promise to withdraw Russian troops from Georgia's separatist territories. The withdrawal of these troops would allow the EU to play a mediating role, paving the way for gradual reintegration via the proposal of expanded autonomy.

NATO's entry into the equation

In Georgia, the EU is viewed as an influential actor due to its democratic values rather than its military or economic power. The entry of NATO, the organisation capable of ensuring defence against Russia, could possibly be considered if the current instability in Abkhazia prompted Russian military manoeuvres in Georgia. This would mean that all efforts by Georgian Dream to avoid displeasing the Kremlin will have been in vain, leading to a rift that would lead to closer ties with the alliance. If the threat is real, perhaps Georgia will align itself with Ukraine and Moldova and propose cooperation. ■

¹ <https://bit.ly/3OkclxF>

² <https://bit.ly/40VMzXU>