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## Georgia's 2024 Parliamentary Election: Pre-election risk assessment

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### Introduction

Georgians will head to the polls on October 26 to elect all 150 members of parliament. This pre-election risk assessment identifies and analyzes risks to the conduct and integrity of these elections to raise awareness and prepare relevant stakeholders domestically and internationally. The assessment covers general risks and vulnerabilities in the political landscape, legal framework and election administration, campaign environment, and media and information space. It is offered in the spirit of partnership, with the aim of serving as a baseline ahead of the official campaign season to inform further risk-tracking and provide focus and direction for mitigation strategies.

Given the widespread protests in Georgia over the passage in May of a “[foreign agents](#)” law by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) government, and the subsequent violent attacks on and arrests of civic actors, journalists, and politicians, it is difficult to anticipate how events will unfold over the next few months. The most significant risk is, therefore, a volatile and evolving crisis that has pitted the government against its people. While the elections are likely to go forward, the role of observers and media will be constrained, if not eliminated. Political violence and arrests are anticipated, and the legitimacy of the elections could be challenged. These risks supersede, but build upon, other shortcomings identified in the election framework and administration, the media and information space, and the political playing field.

Despite these risks, the election results are not a foregone conclusion. Georgian voters have faced significant obstacles to free and fair elections posed by ruling parties in the past but overcame them due to the public's widespread determination to exercise its free will.

### Political Landscape

Georgia is headed into an election campaign amid an unprecedented and volatile political and societal crisis. Hundreds and thousands of protestors, notable in a country of 3.5 million, have been turning out in the streets daily for over a month to protest a “foreign agents” law that the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party pushed through parliament. The opaque Georgian security services, clad in black, have been physically attacking and arresting protestors. Media figures, civil society leaders, and opposition members have been beaten in front of their offices and homes. Others have received threats, had their homes vandalized, and been doxed, inviting further intimidation.



The Ministry of Interior has [announced](#) that violent crackdowns will increase. GD MPs have [openly stated](#) that they are behind many of the attacks and threatened more will come, with one MP sharing a video of their crimes. An MP [announced](#) on May 31 that the government will prosecute anyone protesting the law under the espionage act.

The law mirrors [Russian legislation](#) passed in 2012 that effectively quashed independent civil society and media in the country. The Georgian law also labels civil society, media, and development organizations that receive money from the United States and Europe as “foreign agents” even if their work is charitable, development-related, religious, or educational. The government will be able to conduct investigations, access personal data, demand detailed reporting, and impose restrictions, fines, and prison sentences on individuals and groups deemed noncompliant. All work produced by such organizations will be viewed as serving the interests of foreign states.

The entire legislative drafting process has been opaque, with opposition MPs [forced out](#) of committee and no meaningful consultations with civil society conducted. In the second reading of the law, the GD MPs slipped in additional provisions that would give the monitoring agency overseeing the law the right to request information from individuals—in addition to organizations—including about their [sexual lives](#), for “monitoring purposes.”

Though the GD government claims this law is needed to “enhance transparency,” organizations in Georgia are already required to register and set up bank accounts (subject to money-laundering and other legislation), and information about donors is readily available. A recent [review](#) by the Venice Commission declares that the law is incompatible with democracy and human rights and concludes that it should be withdrawn completely. In response, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [called](#) the report “absurd” and full of “lies”. Notably, while Georgia’s traditional allies have all criticized the law, including the recent announcement from the United States of planned [travel bans and sanctions](#) against GD officials, the only country standing behind GD is Russia. Kremlin insider Alexander Dugin has said that [Georgia](#) is on the right track.

President Salome Zurbishvili vetoed the law, but GD MPs easily overrode her veto on May 28, and the law will go into effect.

The law is a symptom of a deeper illness: the Georgian government’s [rejection of a westward-looking foreign policy](#) and desire to stifle civil society and media—the only remaining checks on government—as part of a broader [illiberal agenda](#) and attempt to stay in power. These aims conflict with the aspirations of the many Georgians who want their country to join the EU and NATO and be a democracy. For years, the GD government has been signaling its [move away](#) from its Western allies, insulting EU and US leaders and diplomats, accusing the West of being part of a “global war party” dragging Georgia into conflict, and the United States in particular of



fomenting revolutions. Meanwhile, GD has parroted Kremlin talking points on Ukraine, served as a sanctions-evasion route for Russia, re-opened flights with Russia, and provided a safe haven for Russians (unless they are from the opposition or civil society). GD leaders have also signed on to the illiberal playbook, attacking women, the LGBTQ community, and pluralism, while embracing Viktor Orbán and Christian nationalism. A foreign agents law is a key chapter in this playbook.

Importantly, the timing of this legislation is purposeful and directly linked to the elections. GD was likely to secure a plurality without this law due to its access to state resources, the unlevel playing field, and a divided opposition (discussed below). However, GD leaders, particularly the former prime minister and oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili—who wields control over the government—did not want to take any chances with their grip on power. Thus, they must attempt to eliminate any possible threat, including electoral oversight by civic and media actors. It is unclear whether they anticipated such a persistent and angry public backlash to their actions.

This tumultuous environment poses the greatest risk heading into Georgia’s elections. It is unclear at the time of writing how the protests will evolve, or whether there will be heightened violence and further arrests of opposition leaders and activists. If so, the campaign and playing field will be fundamentally altered, creating the groundwork for a crisis of legitimacy.

### Election Observation

A key risk to the upcoming elections has to do with the ability of Georgia’s experienced and professional non-partisan election observation organizations to operate. Now that the President’s veto has been overruled, the foreign agents law will come into force, and civic organizations, including the major nonpartisan election observation groups Transparency International (TI), International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), will be required to register as foreign agents shortly after. Most of the major NGOs have pledged to boycott, making them non-compliant and opening them up to fines, which, if they refuse to pay, could result in the freezing of bank accounts, office raids, and other forms of intimidation. Already the offices of key election organizations have been vandalized and their leaders threatened. Furthermore, the Central Election Commission (CEC) is unlikely to accredit organizations that are not compliant with the new law. Even if they are able to observe, election organizations report that it will be extremely difficult for them to mobilize observers given the climate of fear and intimidation.

According to civic leaders, this was a key reason why GD introduced the new legislation before the elections: to kneecap election observation, including election-day monitoring and the conduct of a parallel vote tabulation to verify the count. For years, the GD government has engaged in campaigns to discredit the major election observation groups, as well as some international observer organizations, to preempt potentially critical observer reports on the quality of elections. By both hampering the work of and eroding public trust in election monitors, GD can



more easily dismiss negative reporting on the integrity of the elections and claim their legitimacy. As in the past, pro-government groups [masquerading as independent observers](#) can bolster this claim.

To mitigate risks, Georgian NGOs are conducting scenario planning—preserving their data, establishing chains of command, exploring alternative registration options—to ensure that monitoring can proceed. If they are able to move ahead, Georgian observer groups will need to focus on a public-driven mission, as there is little faith in the official dispute resolution process to resolve complaints and violations. Therefore, it will be essential to convince the public of the true quality of the elections. Data will be critical to these efforts, and observers will need to manage the documentation of irregularities and have an outreach strategy for sharing them with the public. The international community and donors must double down on their support to Georgian observers, advocating for their access to the polls, increasing financial support, bolstering their efforts with international missions, and, importantly, vocally and forcefully messaging full confidence in their work.

If the government and CEC thwart election observation efforts, or the environment becomes too unsafe for monitoring, there is a chance that there will be no independent eyes on the upcoming elections. If the elections go forward in such darkness, the international community should articulate clearly that they cannot be considered free or fair.

## Legal Framework and Election Administration

The main risks in the legal framework include provisions limiting broad voter representation, threats to women’s representation, new and unfamiliar electronic technologies, poorly enforced campaign finance regulations, and a politicized election commission. Despite an EU-brokered agreement among the political parties, EU candidacy requirements, and multiple recommendations from international observers and European bodies, GD has thus far refused to comply, and reforms appear unlikely ahead of the elections.

### *Electoral Framework*

For the first time since constitutional amendments were adopted in 2018, the upcoming parliamentary elections will be based completely on [proportional representation](#). The amendments represented a victory for civil society and political parties, following a decade of advocacy for full proportionalism. The country previously elected roughly half the 150 members of parliament in single-member districts under a first-past-the-post system. The remaining seats were awarded proportionally based on the percentage of the national vote that each party won. [The transition](#) to the new system began in 2020, when the number of single-mandate districts was reduced to 30, prior to a full switch to the proportional system starting with the 2024 parliamentary elections.



Unlike in previous elections, political party blocs will not be allowed to run for parliamentary seats. Many opposition parties and civil representatives worry that this change, coupled with a new 5% threshold, could result in many “lost votes” (people who voted for smaller parties that did not clear the threshold) this October and limited parliamentary representation for smaller parties. The changes, therefore, run the risk of making the parliament less representative of Georgian society. If the 5% threshold had been in place during the 2020 elections, observers point out, only two parties, GD and the United National Movement (UNM), instead of nine, would have been able to secure seats in the parliament. In addition, the April 2021 reform [agreement](#) among the political parties brokered by the President of the European Council Charles Michel included lowering the threshold for the next two parliamentary elections to at least 2%. However, the relevant constitutional amendments are currently stalled in the parliament.

In its December 2023 decision to grant Georgia EU candidacy status, the European Commission mandated [nine necessary reforms](#), one of which was to [fully address election reform recommendations](#) from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Those recommendations included adopting [criteria](#) for recounting votes and invalidating results, a perennial problem in Georgian elections, and ensuring adequate representation of the electorate. The latter is made problematic by the prohibition on blocs and a high threshold. There has been no progress on these reforms.

In an unexpected move in April, parliament abolished the mandatory gender quotas introduced in 2020 to guarantee 25% representation of women on political party lists. Georgia consistently lagged behind the world average with regard to women’s representation in the legislative body until the 2020 parliamentary elections, when—as a result of the quotas—women’s representation increased to 20%. Currently, no major political party has institutionalized internal gender quotas on their own. It is thus likely that the gains made in women’s political participation will be reversed.

### *Electronic Voting*

For the first time, most Georgian voters will vote electronically. The parliament adopted the relevant electoral [framework](#) in December 2022. According to the CEC, [around 90%](#) of voters will cast their votes with the use of optical ballot scanning and counting machines. In addition, electronic voter identification equipment will be used at precincts to verify voter identity. Such equipment will be present in all polling stations representing at least 300 voters, no further than 20km from the nearest district election body, and in self-governing cities and municipal administrative centers. The CEC tested these technologies during the October 2023 and April 2023 by-elections.

This new technology could reduce the possibility of fraud and human error during the counting process and expedite the publication of preliminary results. However, [many caution](#) that voter identification machines do not prevent multiple voting as they do not use biometric data to verify



voter identity. In addition, without an extensive voter education campaign, the introduction of the new technologies could significantly slow down the voting process. [Observers](#) have also noted concerns related to the secrecy of the vote.

### *Campaign Finance*

Georgian law allows for private and state funding of political parties. Private donations are capped at GEL60,000 for individual donations and GEL120,000 for corporate donations annually. Campaign donation records are public. Traditionally, the ruling party receives the most private donations. Opposition parties allege that individuals and businesses are afraid to donate to them due to fear of harassment. During the 2020 parliamentary elections, [Georgian Dream received 43% of all donations](#) and three times more than the party in second place. TI has [reported](#) on some questionable financing of GD campaigns, including the bundling of Georgian business leaders' donations through local charities as pass-throughs, but uncovering violations of finance laws has proven challenging given legal loopholes.

The newly established Anti-Corruption Bureau took over the responsibility for campaign finance monitoring from the State Audit Office (SAO) in September 2023. Much like the SAO, the Anti-Corruption Bureau lacks the legal authority to conduct criminal investigations, and so is limited in its ability to properly respond to allegations of violations of campaign finance law. Additionally, unlike the Auditor General, who is elected by parliament, the head of the Bureau is appointed directly by the prime minister for a six-year term, raising concerns about the independence of the institution.

Besides private and corporate donations, political parties that win at least 1% of the votes during parliamentary elections are entitled to state funding in proportion to the votes they receive — GEL15 for each vote up to 50,000 voters and GEL5 for each subsequent vote. Additional state funding is allocated to parties that nominate at least one woman in every three candidates on the party list, though parties have foregone this funding rather than select women. Observers have noted that the high threshold for securing seats in parliament coupled with the low threshold for acquiring state funding incentivizes small parties to compete for funding rather than representation, further fragmenting the party landscape.

### *Election Administration*

The Central Election Commission (CEC) includes nine partisan members appointed by the qualified political parties and eight “professional” or non-partisan members selected by parliament to serve five-year terms. During the brokered April 19 agreement with European Council President Michel, parties [agreed](#) on both the number of independent CEC members appointed by the parliament (eight) and a two-thirds quorum to approve their appointment. The aim of this deal was to bring forward consensus candidates and instill greater balance in the Commission. However, following the resignation of the CEC Chair, parliament was unable to





secure two-thirds support for a new chair and two other members for vacant seats in July 2021. Instead, through a simple majority, GD has selected candidates to serve for six-month terms and initiated amendments to the election law and parliamentary rules to allow for a simple majority to select CEC commissioners in the future. This has translated to the selection of an additional eight seats on the CEC for the ruling party, resulting in one-party control of the electoral administration. In a [joint opinion](#) issued in December 2023, the Venice Commission and ODIHR criticized the amendments and recommended maintaining the process outlined in the brokered agreement. GD has dismissed this proposal.

## Campaign Environment

One consistent element of Georgia's political party environment over the past ten years has been the public's low approval of parties and sense of political homelessness. Almost half of Georgians say they support "no party" at all. In [December 2023](#) polling, GD received only 19% support, followed by UNM with only 4%. A multitude of small parties combined garnered 12%, with none clearing the 5% threshold. The electoral landscape is shaped by voter apathy and frustration at a lack of desirable options among the majority, coupled with deeply entrenched polarization and animosity between GD and UNM among the rest. The current unrest and widespread protests could change this calculus.

Though [research](#) has shown that opposition coalitions are necessary to defeat ruling parties in backsliding democracies, the Georgian opposition has moved in the opposite direction, continually splintering into ever smaller, often ideologically similar parties due to internal disagreements and ego-driven politics. The need to come together is more pronounced in Georgia given the high threshold described in the section above.

Due to the ongoing crisis, there have been discussions about forming a united front, pro-Europe platform, or "[Georgian Charter](#)", to be shepherded by President Salome Zurbashvili. She proposes that parties come together around the [nine principles](#) put forward by the European Commission. Because of the ban on electoral blocs, this would require everyone to leave their current party and join a single party list, either a new or an existing one. A new political party must submit at least 25,000 voter signatures by August 1, 2024 to qualify for the ballot. In addition to the lack of time, the concept has already hit roadblocks. The former ruling UNM is widely viewed as a poison pill, with other parties refusing to unite with them. UNM is the largest opposition party and has a loyal base but is toxic to many voters due to past grievances from the party's time in power. Former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's party and another opposition party, Lelo, are in continued conflict as well. Korneley Kakachia of the Georgian Institute of Politics remarks that, in sum, the challenge "lies in balancing the need for unity against GD with the realities of voter sentiment and the diverse political landscape".

Kakachia says that an alternative strategy would involve forming two different power centers: a unified platform excluding UNM, and UNM running alone, as it would likely surpass the



electoral threshold of 5%. This two-front approach would prevent the loss of opposition votes due to the high threshold and provide a clean option for voters who would never cast a ballot for UNM. The opposition, according to Kakachia, “must forge a strategy that not only galvanizes their base but also attracts undecided and moderate voters disillusioned with GD’s governance.”

Georgian electoral campaigns have entrenched, and intertwined, challenges that pose a risk to the conduct of the elections: the ruling party’s abuse of state resources and intimidation. These problems have passed from one ruling party to the next and have been reported by domestic and international observer missions for decades, but they persist. Laws exist to prohibit both acts, so the lack of progress is due to the absence of political will on enforcement. The ruling party uses civil servants, as well as public buildings, vehicles, and equipment, for campaign purposes. Further, observer groups and opposition leaders have reported for years the harassment of their activists, intimidation of voters outside polling stations, and pressure on state employees to vote for GD or lose their jobs. In this year’s campaign, independent observers must continue to document violations and clearly message their findings to the public.

## Information Space

The media landscape in Georgia is fractured and polarized, and allegations of government influence over station management and editorial choices have persisted for years. Management changes over the past decade at the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) have undermined its previous reputation for neutrality. The behemoth pro-government Imedi TV dominates the airwaves. Opposition-leaning stations still operate, though under increased pressure, both legal and financial. The space for pluralistic political discussion is almost nonexistent, and quality investigative journalism rare. Regional and local media outlets, which have traditionally benefited from higher public trust, are struggling financially. This divided media environment poses risks to an informed electorate, limits opportunities for some parties to convey their messages to voters, and would present challenges should any election results be contested.

Independent, professional media (mostly online) is increasing its reach and influence, but, considering the [politicized advertising market and insufficient core funding](#), it is highly dependent on international donor support. With the new foreign agents law in place, GD authorities will have opportunities to limit, fine, or shut down critical and independent outlets. Punitive fines would lead to cessation of programming. Journalists have already been [under attack](#) for criticizing the law, with multiple journalists describing harassment and threats against them. In the face of such challenges, analysts expect a great asymmetry, with Imedi’s pro government information machine dominating the airwaves.

In this unstable and vulnerable media space, malign information operations pose an even greater risk ahead of the elections. Georgian experts have [explained](#) that the foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns have become entwined, and GD and the Kremlin propagate shared narratives. For example, media monitoring reports show that pro-GD media often relies on





Kremlin propagandists such as [Scott Ritter](#) to support government positions. The Media Development Fund (MDF) has categorized the threat narrative employed by GD and its allies into five mutually-reinforcing [steps](#) of threat: “The subjects of manipulation were the following five main threats: 1) fear of the opening of the second front and territorial integrity, 2) the second Maidan, 3) the encroachment of ‘sovereign democracy’; 4) democratic institutions, and 5) Western funding.” In recent weeks, the Kremlin has bolstered the “maidan” and “Western influence” threats, for example in Russian President Dmitry Medvedev’s [warning](#) of a foreign hand in the unrest.

While GD, aided by Russia, continues to engage in dis- and misinformation campaigns around [gender](#), LGBTQ rights, and liberal values, observers suggest that the biggest information risks during the election campaign are false narratives about Georgia’s occupied territories and the potential for conflict. GD has tested narratives to suggest that Russia might initiate dialogue with Georgia over the occupied territories in some sort of “settlement”, which could justify a move away from the West. Fear can be a motivating factor for any electorate, and GD has created an information campaign around the threat of invasion following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, labeling Western allies the “[global war party](#)” and [accusing the United States](#) of trying to drag Georgia into a conflict with Russia. According to [polling](#), however, Georgians name “Russian aggression” and “occupation” as key sources of their concern. According to Tamar Kintsurashvili of the Media Development Fund (MDF), the narratives around war and the occupied territories blend nicely with GD’s promoted concept of “[sovereign democracy](#),” or strategic non-alignment as a way to fend off perceived threats.

To address this challenging information space, civic actors are increasing their preemptive engagement, developing clear messages about the Georgian elections, true threats facing Georgia, and implications of the foreign agents law, as well as identifying trusted messengers to deliver them.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Heading into the October elections, Georgia faces a toxic combination of longstanding risks to the election process—abuse of state resources, an unlevel playing field, a fractured media environment, and partisan election administration. New threats have emerged as the conflict around the new foreign agents law continues to escalate, creating an unstable environment for elections. In sum, risks include:

- Civil unrest due to further violence against the Georgian people, civil society, journalists, and opposition figures; a rising number of detentions and arrests and increased intimidation
- Cancellation or limitation (due to fines, arrests, lack of accreditation, and/or difficulties recruiting monitors) of major nonpartisan Georgian election observation efforts; limited



- or no oversight over the conduct of all aspects of the election (pre-election, election-day, the count)
- Restricted media coverage of the campaign due to pressure on or penalties against journalists and media outlets; uneven coverage of campaign contestants, limited investigative journalism into irregularities
  - Failure to implement electoral reforms to restore some independence to election administration and to remove ban on electoral blocs and/or the high threshold; the partisan election commission remains, casting doubt on the process and fair adjudication of complaints
  - Brokered unified opposition platform fails, further fracturing the electorate and resulting in votes being “lost” due to high threshold
  - GD information campaigns on threats of war and territorial integrity, the West as a “global war party,” and false narratives about the foreign agents law frighten and confuse voters; accurate counter-messaging fails to penetrate
  - Possibility of contested election results and instability following the elections; civil unrest

Understanding these broad, and, it is to be hoped, avoidable risks can serve as a launching point for scenario planning and risk mitigation. Georgian civil society and media organizations are already coordinating and preparing strategies to avoid the worst outcomes. Civic groups report the primary importance of focusing on a public outreach strategy given the limitations of the electoral or legal frameworks for resolving the problems outlined above. They will need to:

- Develop and disseminate counter-narratives to preempt disinformation campaigns from GD and the Kremlin about threats of war, the role of Western allies, and the foreign agents law; accurately explain the foreign agents law and its possible endangerment of Georgia’s European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations
- Raise public awareness about the elections, electronic voting, and electoral options
- (For media) provide platforms for diverse candidates, investigate election irregularities, ensure broad coverage in rural areas
- Following the elections, clearly present election observation data and documentation of irregularities to the public through a unified approach. It will be critical that observers speak with one voice about the integrity of the elections

Civil society is shouldering much of the burden in addressing challenges, and it is incumbent upon the international community and donors to significantly amplify its support.

- Governments and policymakers must adopt a more forceful response to the GD government’s actions. Specifically, the EU should join the United States by proposing sanctions and travel bans for GD officials and their families. Direct bilateral aid and support to the Georgian government should be suspended.
- The EU should consider reversing Georgia’s candidate status until election reforms are passed in accordance with the candidacy requirements. Council President Charles Michel



should consider a return mission to pressure GD lawmakers to honor their previous agreements.

- The United States and the EU should increase support to domestic election observation and independent media organizations, as well as to public diplomacy efforts to address disinformation about the EU and the United States perpetuated by the GD government. Creative financing avenues may need to be explored as the foreign agents law goes into effect.
- The United States and the EU should support multiple foreign election assessment missions and observation efforts that serve as critical support to Georgian civil society.
- Government leaders should publicly articulate, ahead of the elections, serious doubts about the legitimacy of any election process conducted with hampered nonpartisan observation and failed electoral reform.
- After the elections, US and EU leaders must publicly stand behind the work of Georgia's domestic election observers and highlight their findings.

Though this assessment highlights risks facing Georgia's upcoming parliamentary elections, it can also serve as a cautionary tale for the broader region and highlight the need for US and EU engagement. Moldova, Armenia, and other nations are at a tipping point and at risk of falling into the illiberal club of nations and the Kremlin's sphere of influence. Support for democrats and civil society on the ground is urgently needed.

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