

Report



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Transatlantic Foundation

Endangered Watchdogs

*The Uncertain Future of Citizen Election
Observation in Georgia*

Tamara Sartania
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Summary

The 2025 municipal elections marked a turning point in Georgia's democratic trajectory. As major opposition parties boycotted the contest following the alleged fraud in the 2024 parliamentary elections, the vote took place without credible domestic or international election observation—a first since the early 1990s. The country's leading watchdog organizations refused to observe the vote, arguing that the political and legal environment no longer allowed for meaningful observation or genuinely competitive elections. Major international observer organizations did not deploy missions either, which left the field to pro-government and fake observer groups. As a result, there was no independent verification of the campaign environment, election-day procedures, or the official results announced by the Central Election Commission.

The absence of credible election observation is not an isolated development but rather the result of a broader process of democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space in Georgia. Over the past two years, the ruling Georgian Dream party has introduced legislative and administrative measures that significantly restrict the activities of civil society organizations (CSOs), independent media, and the political opposition. These include the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, the Foreign Agents Registration Act, amendments restricting access to foreign grants, and changes to election-observation rules that severely limit observers' ability to detect fraud on election day. Combined with pressure on independent organizations, the freezing of the bank accounts of CSOs, and growing repression against protesters and opposition leaders, these developments have fundamentally altered the operating environment for citizen election observation.

These developments also reflect a changing broader international context. Since 2025, democracy assistance and election-observation efforts globally have been weakened by declining international funding and growing hostility toward independent scrutiny. In particular, the termination of much US democracy assistance has had a direct impact on Georgian CSOs, which have historically relied on external support. At the same time, authoritarian and hybrid regimes increasingly use government-aligned and fake observer groups to legitimize flawed electoral processes and to discredit independent monitoring efforts.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines three political scenarios for Georgia in the coming years: parliamentary elections taking place as scheduled in 2028, early elections triggered by political crisis, and early elections combined with a referendum on the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. All three would have major consequences for Georgia's future, and in all three the prospects for credible election observation are highly uncertain. Traditional election-day observation models, including parallel vote tabulation, may no longer be feasible under the highly restrictive conditions. Instead, domestic organizations may need to adopt alternative and decentralized approaches, including citizen-based monitoring, secure digital reporting tools, and remote documentation methods.

Preserving the independent domestic election-observation infrastructure is critically important for Georgia in this difficult environment. Domestic organizations will need to focus on maintaining a degree of institutional survival, protecting their core expertise, strengthening their credibility with the public, and developing alternative funding models. At the same time, international donors should not give up but instead adapt their support strategies to the country's restrictive environment and continue defending the legitimacy of credible election observation as an essential democratic safeguard.

Introduction

In October 2025, Georgian citizens headed to polling stations to elect mayors in 59 municipalities and five self-governing cities, including the capital Tbilisi, as well as the members of local councils (Sakrebulos). This was the first contest among the country's political parties since the 2024 parliamentary elections, when domestic and international election observation organizations had highlighted fraudulent practices, condemned the outcome, and called for a new vote.¹ Opposition parties had rejected the official results as not representing the will of the people and those that had cleared the 5% threshold boycotted the new parliament.

This time, there were no election observers. Georgia's premier, credible election watchdog organizations, which had fielded observation missions for all elections since they were established in the early 1990s, did not register to observe these municipal ones. Neither did the major international election observation organizations, which too had operated in the country since the early 1990s. Instead, observation organizations affiliated with the ruling Georgian Dream party were at the polling stations, while fake international observers appeared on government-affiliated media to create the illusion of credibly run elections. Under these conditions, there was no independent alternative to the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) as a source of information on the result of the vote. Georgian Dream was declared the winner in all mayoral races without the need for a second round and to have secured comfortable majorities in all local councils.

This paper examines the role of citizen observation in Georgia's elections and democratic trajectory. It also looks at three electoral scenarios for the next couple of years and what types of citizen observation would be possible under different circumstances. The paper ends with recommendations for domestic observation organizations and for international donors.

The Importance of Election Observation

Credible elections signal a country's democratic maturity and rule of law. Election observation plays a critical role in transitional democracies as a mechanism for enhancing electoral credibility and public trust in election outcomes, reducing post-election violence, and facilitating acceptance of results by the losing parties. Election observation groups publicize and deter fraud, and they strengthen basic standards of election administration.² International observers generate credible information about electoral quality, which in turn increases incentives for governments to conduct cleaner elections.³ Thus, for countries that are democratizing, where institutional checks are weak and the credibility of elections is often questionable, observation can be a deterrent to manipulation and a credible source of monitoring and documenting irregularities.

The absence of robust independent observation significantly undermines transparency, credibility, and public confidence in the electoral process. Certainty is lacking about key procedural guarantees that are core to the standards for democratic elections, such as independent counting, impartial observer access, and effective challenge mechanisms. This means that elections cannot be guaranteed to meet international standards for being

free, fair, and competitive, and that their results may not be accepted domestically or internationally, resulting in political turmoil that further weakens democratic stability.

Meanwhile, governments with poor or no democratic credentials increasingly rely on alternatives to established credible election observer groups to whitewash flawed elections and to strengthen regime legitimacy in the eyes of the domestic public and, to some extent, of the international community.⁴ The European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) lists several criteria to define such fake observer groups, including lack of transparent funding and disclosure of observation methods as well as making statements that legitimize controversial elections.⁵

Georgia is not only a country trying to anchor its democracy but also a candidate for EU membership, regardless of the government's suspension of accession talks and the deteriorating relations between the two sides. As such, it is still expected to meet EU democratic benchmarks and the Copenhagen Criteria for accession. Repeated deficits in election integrity will further stall the country's accession aspiration, and this cannot be addressed or prevented in the absence of credible, independent domestic and international election observation.

Georgia's Election Observation Context

Since Georgia gained independence in 1991, its elections have been observed by a mix of international missions and domestic groups, which gradually helped shape its electoral culture. In the early 1990s, observation was limited and often improvised: the precursor to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) deployed short-term missions to the presidential and parliamentary elections in 1992 and 1995 respectively, alongside small delegations from its Parliamentary Assembly, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, and various Western countries. The US-based National Democratic Institute also deployed short-term observers in those early days. Domestic observation was in its infancy, with international actors laying the groundwork for the establishment of citizen observation organizations, such as the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) in 1994, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) in 1995, and Transparency International (TI) Georgia in 2000. In the early 2000s, systematic observation by domestic groups and the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) became the norm. In the 2003 elections, the finding of observers, mainly through the parallel vote tabulation methodology, played a central role in exposing fraud and delegitimizing the official results, and thus in triggering the Rose Revolution. Subsequent elections saw domestic observers use increasingly sophisticated methods and real-time reporting, as well as an increase in the number of domestic organizations registering to carry out observation.

As domestic observation organizations proliferated, the ISFED, the GYLA, and TI-Georgia remained the most credible ones. They strictly followed a sophisticated methodology, fielded long-term and election-day observers, and regularly published their findings as well as their sources of funding. International observation missions and various international bodies frequently cited their findings produced in their own reports and statements. The 2025 municipal elections were the first occasion when these three organizations refused to carry out observation

as they deemed the environment not conducive for free, fair, and competitive elections, including when it comes to credible observation.

Legislative Framework and Political Environment

Over the course of the past two years, Georgian Dream has introduced sweeping legal and administrative measures that have drastically shrunk the space for civil society and independent media. Notably, in line with a growing international trend, a Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence was adopted in 2024, which requires civil society organizations (CSOs) and media outlets that receive over 20% of their funding from abroad to register as “entities representing the interests of foreign powers” or face heavy fines.⁶ Major ones refused to include themselves in what they called a “defamatory registry”.⁷ In April 2025, Georgian Dream escalated with the passing of a Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), modeled on the US law of the same name but far broader in scope, which compels organizations and individuals receiving foreign funds to register or face criminal charges, punishable by fines and/or prison terms of up to five years.⁸ Georgian CSOs, the EU, and the OSCE/ODIHR condemned the law as a tool to silence critics of the government. The GYLA has challenged it in the Constitutional Court and in the European Court of Human Rights, which has begun hearing the case.⁹ Soon after the FARA was adopted, the Anti-Corruption Bureau began proceedings against several leading CSOs, demanding sensitive data on their events and beneficiaries under this and other statutes.¹⁰ The targeted organizations refused to comply and pledged to challenge these actions. Some succeeded in obtaining an interim measure from various UN Committees aimed at protecting the disclosure of the sensitive information.¹¹

Alongside the legislative changes and administrative actions against CSOs, in April 2025, the CEC amended the rules for election observation and media reporting on election days—including by curbing observers’ rights to demand to see voters’ ID in order to verify their identity and by restricting the media to filming for no more than 10 minutes inside polling stations, with longer coverage allowed only from a designated area—that effectively rendered election-day observation meaningless.¹² Domestic observation organizations documented significant vote rigging, especially on election day, during the 2024 parliamentary elections.¹³ This involved voters using other people’s personal ID numbers (sometimes via notes inserted in passports or phone photos) with the help of complicit registrars who improperly verified them, as well as avoiding proper finger inking to enable repeat voting at multiple polling stations.¹⁴ The rule changes in 2025 have crucial implications for the ability of observers to verify the conduct of elections. With them not allowed to properly check voters identity against the voters list, the same fraud methods might be employed again without detection.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the CEC’s reputation and credibility has declined in recent years, including due to amendments in 2024 to the rules for electing its members, which shifted the balance in the body charged with administering elections in favor of commissioners loyal to Georgian Dream.¹⁵

Since the 2024 parliamentary elections, in addition to the increasingly restrictive legislative framework, domestic and international organizations that traditionally fielded election observation missions in Georgia have been significantly undermined due to the global reduction in aid funds, especially from the United States under the second Trump administration (see below). In 2025, the US-based International Republican Institute and National

Democratic Institute closed their offices in Tbilisi following the termination of their US government grants. Also last year, to further tighten control over domestic CSOs, the Law on Grants was amended to require all donors to obtain approval from the government before releasing funds.¹⁶ This immediately had a chilling effect. In June, the British embassy cancelled planned grants for voter education and domestic election observation, citing uncertainty over how the law would be enforced.¹⁷ Just over a month before the municipal elections, the government went further and froze the bank accounts of several Georgian CSOs, including the ISFED, on charges of sabotage of the constitutional order and national security, further limiting the ability of this major election watchdog to engage in any type of observation.¹⁸

Historically, civil society has been heavily dependent on donor funding, as the business community has mostly stayed away from contributing money to what the government might perceive as a political activity. A legislative amendment in April 2026 introduced new penalties for businesses for carrying out political activities that are not related to their entrepreneurial activity.¹⁹ This will likely have a chilling effect on individual entrepreneurs or people employed in the private sector in general and further restrict the ability of civil society to raise money domestically. Crowdfunding remains an option but the public sympathetic to the cause of democratic renewal is already spread thin, making monthly contributions to the joint funds aimed at supporting political prisoners, their families, and paying fines and fees for those subject to punitive laws.

The Municipal Elections of 2025

The October 2025 municipal elections took place under a considerably revised electoral framework that credible domestic observers saw as showing Georgian Dream's attempt to further cement its dominance at every level of government.²⁰ Ahead of the vote, the Electoral Code was amended in important ways that increased the majoritarian element of the mixed electoral system. In Tbilisi, the number of single-member majoritarian seats rose from 10 to 25 out of 50, while in self-governing cities the size of the local council was reduced from 35 to 25 seats and the number of majoritarian seats was increased from 7 to 10. In other municipalities, only 15 seats were to be filled proportionally from party lists, with up to five majoritarian seats depending on the size of the electorate. In addition, the electoral threshold for winning proportional seats was raised to 4% from 2.5% in Tbilisi and 3% in other municipalities. The government also abolished the 40% threshold for majoritarian seats, allowing a simple plurality to determine winners. These steps reversed reforms adopted in 2021 under the agreement between Georgian Dream and opposition parties brokered by European Council President Charles Michel.²¹ Domestic watchdogs such as the ISFED and international bodies including the Council of Europe's Venice Commission²² criticized the changes as rushed, made without consultations, and designed to benefit Georgian Dream, warning of the risks they pose to political pluralism.

The political situation remained extremely charged following the controversial parliamentary elections and the government's decision in November 2024 to postpone Georgia's EU accession negotiations until 2028. In an attempt to disperse the protests that had kept Tbilisi's main thoroughfare closed since the parliamentary elections, the government cracked down on activists from diverse social groups—including teachers, students, journalists, doctors, and private-sector workers. Alongside resorting to violence that saw hundreds of people injured, the police arrested and jailed protesters on what many CSOs considered politically motivated charges.²³ Georgian

Dream passed new laws that considerably restricted civil liberties by increasing penalties and introducing criminal charges for the repeated blocking of roads, establishing preemptive administrative detention, criminalizing verbal insults of officials (including online), and banning face coverings, laser pointers, and fireworks.²⁴ The Venice Commission criticized these measures as disproportionate,²⁵ but the authorities proceeded with imposing heavy fines, arresting more demonstrators, and impounding charitable funds intended to help those fined.²⁶

Georgian Dream also moved during 2025 to sideline its political opponents. The parliament first created an investigative commission to look into “systemic crimes” allegedly committed under the previous government.²⁷ It then expanded the legal grounds for the Constitutional Court to ban parties or individuals deemed aligned with already banned groups.²⁸ Several major opposition leaders, including the whole leadership of the Akhali party, were arrested and detained on charges of refusing to testify before the abovementioned parliamentary committee,²⁹ and in one case for damaging a poster of a Georgian Dream mayoral candidate.³⁰ The State Security Service arrested the former secretary of the United National Movement party on charges of bribery for publicly offering law-enforcement officers a monetary prize for disobeying repressive orders of the government.³¹ Fearing prosecution, the former Georgian Dream prime minister Giorgi Gakharia, who now leads the For Georgia party, fled to Germany. Two leaders of the Lelo party were jailed briefly and later pardoned by President Mikheil Kavelashvili.³² These arrests severely undermined the ability of the opposition parties to campaign freely ahead of the municipal elections.

With no credible organizations carrying out observation, there was no independent way to ascertain if the fraudulent practices alleged in 2024 were repeated.

Meanwhile, attempts to consolidate the opposition for the municipal elections failed. The United National Movement, the Coalition for Change, and some small parties ruled out participating (and later rejected the elections’ outcomes). Lelo and For Georgia took part but only nominated mayoral candidates in 36 out of the 64 municipalities.

As result of all the above, the municipal elections saw considerably less pluralism and voter enthusiasm than previously: only 12 parties were officially registered to run, compared to 43 in 2021. Turnout was 40.9%, down from 51.9% in 2021. The boycott by major parties effectively rendered the contest something of an empty exercise. The CEC declared that Georgian Dream won a sweeping victory across all municipalities, winning all mayoral races in the first round and garnering an average of 80% of the vote across municipalities.

Election day went by without much outcry about violations of procedures. With no credible organizations carrying out observation, there was no independent way to ascertain if the fraudulent practices alleged in 2024 were repeated. According to the CEC, 132 complaints were registered on election day compared to 1,840 in 2021. Only four of these were filed by the registered observation organizations, compared to 599 in 2021 when the main domestic ones were involved.³³ Similarly, there was no independent way to verify the CEC’s official results.

The lack of credible observer missions for the municipal elections meant observers aligned with the government had the field to themselves to lend legitimacy to the vote. The EPDE identified at least 29 international fake observers present in Georgia for the elections.³⁴ Based on EPDE criteria, the majority of the 27 domestic organizations accredited by the CEC and the district election commissions could all be classified as fake.

The New International Reality

Since 2025, a fundamental shift has taken place in the field of election observation, reshaping its funding base, operating environment, and perceived role within the global democracy ecosystem. For decades, there was consistent financial support and broadly welcoming political environments for domestic and international observation. However, the field is now affected by the convergence of severe funding cuts, shrinking civic space, and heightened political contestation.

The greatest change has been the sharp decline in international financial support for election observation and electoral assistance. Recent assessments of the global democracy ecosystem document how the termination or suspension of major democracy assistance programs, particularly those funded by the United States, has resulted in the near-elimination of externally supported electoral assistance and observation initiatives.³⁵ In the US case, the change is part of a broader shift in foreign policy under the second Trump administration, which has not only dismantled key foreign aid structures such as the US Agency for International Development, but has also instructed diplomats not to comment on the legitimacy or fairness of foreign elections unless there is a “clear and compelling” US strategic interest.³⁶ This is a departure from decades of US practice in promoting democratic processes abroad and shows how democracy assistance, including election support, has been deprioritized in Washington.

Traditionally, the EU and individual member states have also supported Georgian domestic observation organizations, though on a smaller scale than US support. Given the cuts in European official development assistance in 2025, including in the democracy field, it is possible that there will be less funding for election observation in the coming years. On the other hand, this might not be the case as the European Commission’s proposed EU’s Multinational Financial Framework for 2028–2034 almost doubles the external action budget.³⁷

Concurrently, the political and legal environment for election observation has deteriorated around the world. Governments increasingly restrict accreditation for international and domestic observers, limit their access to polling and counting processes, and deploy legal or administrative measures to constrain them. Observers are also now frequently targeted through defamation campaigns, legal harassment, and intimidation, as part of a broader pattern of democratic backsliding and hostility toward independent scrutiny.³⁸ These dynamics have raised the risks and costs associated with observation.

At the same time, these pressures have prompted a normative re-evaluation of election observation. Observers are increasingly recognized not as neutral technical actors but as defenders of fundamental political rights, including participation in public affairs, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. There is an emerging advocacy effort, especially in Europe, to renew funding for election observation. For example, the EU’s former high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borell, has argued that election observation remains

central to upholding democratic norms and EU values, and highlighted how CSOs and external observers are crucial for transparency and credibility in contested elections. He therefore called on the EU institutions to remain committed to supporting observation efforts as a means of defending democracy and human rights.³⁹ It remains to be seen if such advocacy will lead to sustained funding.

This global situation has implications for the prospects for domestic and international election observation in Georgia. However, the magnitude of the impact will largely depend on the ability of the country's domestic observation organizations to receive foreign funding at whatever level without jeopardizing their safety as well as their ability to fundraise locally and attract volunteers.

The Worsening Operating Environment

The operating environment for civil society, including domestic election observation organizations, continues to deteriorate in Georgia. As Georgian Dream has so far failed to completely shut down the activities of independent and critical CSOs and media, it has since 2024 initiated a set of new legislative amendments to close loopholes that might still allow independent actors to operate. Few doubt that the party's intention is to fully suffocate the independence of the civic sector, especially the actors critical of the government. The legal requirement for all civil society actors to register under the FARA and to seek government approval prior to receiving any grant has left most critical CSOs with little choice but to completely halt their operations (as in the case of Rights Georgia or the GYLA) or to register as organizations abroad (as in the case of Transparency International Georgia). The bank accounts of the CSOs that were frozen in August 2025 remain so at the time of writing, with no clear deadline for the investigation of alleged sabotage to end and any judicial proceedings to begin, which would allow the CSOs to defend their cause.

Sweeping legislative amendments in April 2026 increased the state's control over foreign funding for civil society by expanding the definition of "grants" that require government approval, and introducing criminal penalties, including prison sentences of up to six years, for violations.⁴⁰ The changes criminalize "external lobbying", restrict political party membership for individuals linked to foreign-funded entities, and impose fines on businesses engaged in political activity, intensifying the crackdown on media, civil society, and the political opposition. In addition, in an attempt to prevent the possibility of Georgian CSOs registered abroad to observe elections, Georgian citizens have been banned from registering as international observers.

So far, however, the government has not fully implemented all this repressive legislation: beyond the abovementioned asset freeze of several key CSOs, no organization or individual has been prosecuted or fined based on these laws. But the Law on Grants has had a chilling effect, effectively stopping the provision of donor funding to critical CSOs. It remains to be seen how the government proceeds with the implementation of the different laws and whether civic actors are able to be creative and resilient enough to survive these latest blows.

In this difficult context, domestic observation organizations risk losing their human capacity as the majority of their staff will start to leave for economic reasons. This will severely curtail their ability to do important work between elections, such as monitoring and commenting on developments and training observers. Some

organizations might shut down. While they may reemerge if the environment becomes more conducive, the longer they are out of business the harder this will be—or to launch new ones—regardless of the degree of commitment of individuals who will be forced to leave this field.

Three Scenarios

The political and legislative environment in Georgia is not conducive to holding genuinely democratic elections. Politics will likely remain highly polarized, with diminishing pluralism. This only makes it more important that, when elections are held, independent observers are able to scrutinize their conduct and the validity of the official results. The next parliamentary elections are due in October 2028 but, given the increasingly repressive legislative framework and the political reality, it is hard to predict with certainty when they will be held, and whether domestic groups will be able to observe them, or even if observing them would make any real sense. The presence of credible international observers is not certain as well. It will be up to the government whether to invite an OSCE/ODIHR mission or to do so sufficiently in advance for the organization to deploy observers under its standard methodology. Other international observers are dependent on their ability to secure funding for missions, which will depend on the interest of the international community in Georgia's elections as well as the general trend in foreign aid. Meanwhile, political protests are ongoing and, though their impetus has dwindled somewhat, the general dissatisfaction with the regime has not dissipated. Calls for early and impartially administered elections remain a central demand of the protest movement. At the time of writing, Georgian Dream had consistently ruled out early elections, but this may change. Below are three scenarios that may unfold in this regard.

No Elections Before 2028

If the government holds the line and the next parliamentary elections take place in October 2028, the operating environment for domestic observation will likely remain shaped by continued legal, administrative, and financial pressure on civic actors and the political opposition. If Georgian Dream succeeds in banning most opposition parties, as it has vowed to do,⁴¹ as well as in erecting more barriers to entry in politics for people who have worked in the civic sector, the next elections promise to be even less competitive than 2024 ones or the 2025 municipal elections. Under such conditions, short-term or election-day observation would be of limited value as key determinants of electoral integrity, such as the legal framework, media environment, and genuine political competition, would be eliminated well before any vote is cast. At the same time, the conditions necessary for meaningful, long-term election observation would be largely absent.

Over the next couple of years, domestic observation organizations will likely struggle to remain in existence. Rebuilding lost human capacity in this field ahead of elections in 2028 would require time, resources, and diversified support from domestic and international sources. In addition, while Georgia has not so far suffered an exodus of civic activists on a similar scale as Belarus and Russia, given the ever-more repressive environment, the end of donor funding, and the few alternative economic opportunities for those who have been working in this sector, many more might relocate to EU and other countries, which would deplete the pool of available skilled observers. In the environment of prolonged domestic political closure and diminished international leverage,

many international actors would likely treat the conduct and outcome of the elections as a *fait accompli* and shift their attention away from procedural assessment of the process toward post-elections political engagement and stability considerations.

Early Elections in 2027

An unexpected crisis provoking sustained and growing protests that spread to segments of society that have stayed away from the post-elections protest movement, as happened in Serbia in the past year or so, might prompt Georgian Dream to hold early elections. Currently, this is unlikely as the party has shown remarkable resistance to pressure. But it could decide that bringing forward the next polls could win it a two-thirds majority in parliament, which would allow it to amend the constitution. If a significant number of opposition leaders and senior political figures remain imprisoned or otherwise legally incapacitated, the competitiveness of the elections would be substantially compromised before the campaign period even began.

Within the next year, there will still be some capacity for domestic election observation, but in fragile form—it will be organizationally weakened, underfunded, legally constrained, and operating under continuous pressure, but not fully dismantled. According to the electoral law, should parliament be dissolved, new elections must be held within 60 days, which would leave little time for domestic election observation organizations to prepare fully. They would therefore face a dual challenge in case of early elections: preserving their institutional survival while attempting to document violations in a context where core conditions for competitive elections—including political choice, media access, and freedom of participation—are severely weakened. The tight timeframe would also leave them less time to carry out every necessary operational task (recruitment, training, deployment design, incident verification, complaints and appeals) and to mobilize resources, and especially to raise funds domestically as international support may not be readily available or else safe to accept. These constraints would render full-scale election observation of limited relevance, as the decisive elements shaping the electoral outcome would be in place well in advance of voting day.

Domestic groups could still try to conduct limited observation of snap elections, with the primary aim of documenting the most significant irregularities as well as uncovering any new type of election manipulation that Georgian Dream might use. Given the escalating repression, they may need to rely on alternative methodologies; for example, drawing on practices used in Belarus in 2022, where civil society replaced formally accredited observers with decentralized “citizen controllers”, delivered training through encrypted digital platforms, and collected anonymous, real-time reports of electoral violations via secure digital channels.

Early Elections and a Referendum on Euro-Atlantic Integration

Georgian Dream may seek to combine early parliamentary elections with a referendum on the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration, most likely framed around the goal of EU and/or NATO membership. Article 78 of the constitution—added in 2018, under the Georgian Dream government—mandates that all government bodies must take all necessary steps to ensure the country’s full integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. The article aimed to set the country’s foreign policy course and may have been adopted to allow Georgian Dream to convince

its supporters of its pro-West aspiration. However, there are clear signs that actors affiliated with Georgian Dream are attempting to reshape the public discourse on seeking membership in the EU and NATO as well as on neutrality. Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, pro-government media and allied figures have increasingly amplified narratives casting the EU and Western countries as threatening or self-interested.⁴² Political groups advocate official neutrality as a means of securing peace and stability, even questioning the sincerity of the historic popular support for EU integration. Yet, despite this, reliable public opinion polling continues to show strong majority support for EU and NATO membership.

While Article 28 has not prevented the government from steering Georgia away from the EU membership path, it obliges maintaining, at the rhetorical level at least, that foreign policy goals include EU integration. Removing Article 28 from the constitution through a referendum would give political cover to Georgian Dream for getting rid of an obstacle to its rule. In Georgia, referendum outcomes are automatically binding and can only be overturned by another referendum, unlike a constitutional amendment adopted through a parliamentary vote. This considerably raises the political stakes in the process. Credible observation of such a referendum would be crucial to safeguard the integrity of the process and prevent, or at least document, manipulation of the result as the impact of a referendum decision would be longer-lasting than that of a legislative one. There is a high likelihood that the ruling party would resort to all available means to ensure an outcome it would use to legitimize domestically and internationally Georgia's U-turn away from the EU and to cement foreign policy orientation for years to come.

Recommendations for Georgian and International Actors

Given the increasingly restrictive environment they face, in any of these scenarios, Georgian election observation organizations will need to adapt their strategies and methods. This may include shifting from traditional, full-scale election-day observation toward more flexible and resilient monitoring models that prioritize decentralized citizen reporting and the secure collection of digital evidence. This will allow them to continue documenting electoral irregularities and systemic violations even when formal observation is constrained or rendered ineffective.

In the meantime, these organizations must focus on preserving their core institutional capacity by maintaining a minimum viable structure. In a context where financial resources are limited and legal risks are high, sustaining a small number of key staff, retaining institutional knowledge, and continuing basic training activities is essential for ensuring that credible observation capacity can be rebuilt and increased in the future. The loss of key experienced personnel would significantly undermine the long-term resilience of Georgia's democratic infrastructure.

To counter the growing presence of government-aligned and fake observers, credible election observation organizations should work to strengthen their credibility with the public, including through communicating their methods, funding sources, and findings. By clearly distinguishing themselves through openness and adherence to international standards, they can reinforce their credibility and help the public differentiate between genuine and

non-credible observers. In addition, in the current environment, the public has an increasingly important role to play in safeguarding electoral integrity. Where possible, these organizations should encourage citizens not only to vote but also to engage in monitoring and reporting: by using secure reporting tools, members of the public can significantly contribute to documenting violations and increasing transparency in the electoral process.

Finally, domestic observation organizations should explore building alternative funding streams through crowdfunding and forging stronger links with diaspora networks. They could also establish operational or support structures abroad that would allow them to carry out part of their work, including analysis, advocacy, and fundraising, in less restrictive environment, while maintaining connections with in-country actors through secure and carefully managed online and offline channels. At the regional level, Belarusian, Russian, and Azerbaijani civil society actors have a wealth of experience in this field that could be further shared and adapted to the Georgian context.

Given that legal restrictions almost prohibit Georgian civil society organizations from receiving and using foreign funding, and the barriers to domestic funding, international donors should recalibrate their support for election observation ones and aim at sustaining their survival. Preserving the infrastructure of independent election observation is critical and will require donors to provide core operational support, including for staff retention, legal assistance, and basic organizational functions. Here too, there are examples of how to do this from donors' experiences with supporting civil society in countries with highly restrictive environments, such as Belarus, that could be shared and adapted to the Georgian context.

International donors should also invest in the development and scaling of alternative observation methods that are better suited to restrictive environments such as the one in Georgia. This includes supporting civic technology solutions for secure reporting, remote monitoring approaches, and decentralized secure data collection systems. Such innovations help maintain a degree of electoral oversight even when traditional observer missions are not feasible.

Finally, international donors and institutions should take a more active role in defending the legitimacy of credible election observation in general. This includes publicly distinguishing between professional, methodologically sound observer missions and those that do not meet basic standards, as well as amplifying the findings of reputable domestic organizations in international forums. Such efforts are essential to counter the growing use of "fake observers" as a tool to legitimize flawed electoral processes.

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About the Author(s)

Tamara Sartania is an independent consultant, specializing in democratic elections, civil society development, parliamentary and political party strengthening, and women's political participation. She has worked for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights as an election adviser and as a core team member for election observation missions. She was also deputy chief of party in the Georgia office of the National Democratic Institute, for which she also worked as a thematic analyst for election observation missions to Ethiopia, Ukraine, and Lebanon.

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