

**Report**  
**Pre-Election Assessment Mission to Georgia**  
**September 2-8, 2024**

By Laura Thornton<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

Georgians will head to the polls on October 26 to elect all 150 members of parliament. In May 2024, with the German Marshall Fund (GMF), I wrote a [pre-election risk assessment](#) that identified and analyzed risks to the conduct and integrity of the upcoming elections to raise awareness and prepare relevant stakeholders domestically and internationally. The assessment covered the political landscape, legal framework and election administration, campaign environment, and media and information space. It served as a baseline ahead of the official campaign season to inform further risk tracking and progress on mitigation strategies. This report serves to update some of those findings with analysis from interviews on the ground.

From September 2 to 8, 2024, GMF’s Black Sea Trust (BST) and Rondeli Foundation organized a “Friends of Georgia” mission to Tbilisi to follow up on the May evaluation, track developments in the electoral landscape, and measure progress or backsliding on risks identified. The team included: former US Ambassador to Georgia Ian Kelly; Tiago Antunes, Secretary of State for European Affairs in Portugal; Reinhard Vesser, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung; Tim Judah, The Economist; Thomas Vogel, director of the European Platform for Democratic Elections; Constance Victor, European Council on Foreign Relations; leadership from the Black Sea Trust and Rondeli Foundation; and myself.

The team met with the leadership of all opposition political party groupings and independent opposition parties (Federalists and Girchi), leaders of leading Georgian NGOs, representatives from independent media outlets, heads of election observation organizations, senior diplomats from the US and Europe, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) leaders, the director of the Central Election Commission, foreign policy and security experts, pollsters, and disinformation experts. Ambassador Kelly, Clara Voluntiru (BST), and I also had a private audience with President Salome Zurbishvili. Members of the Georgian Dream (GD) government turned down all requests for a meeting with the delegation.

A key finding from the mission is that the risks outlined in May – the implementation of the new [foreign agents law](#), attacks on civil society and media, failure of opposition parties to form a united front, the GD government’s refusal to implement promised electoral reform, widespread disinformation campaigns and fear-mongering – remain. In addition, since May, the government has pledged further [autocratic measures](#), including the elimination of all opposition parties and “Nuremberg” trials to imprison representatives from civil society, media, and opposition who have criticized them.

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Another takeaway from the mission is the belief of many civil society, media, and opposition representatives that Georgian voters have turned on GD and view the election as a choice between the West and Russia. Even with electoral intimidation and possible manipulation, they are confident that GD cannot win. This belief, however, was contradicted by those who closely track voter opinions and spend time outside Tbilisi. They report that the top issues for most Georgians are the economy and jobs, not EU membership, and GD's message of "prosperity vs. sanctions" – understanding Georgians' dependency on trade with Russia – is resonating. Further, GD's threat that an opposition victory means war is also compelling for many voters. Though the country is awash in contradictory polling data, polling figures from credible non-partisan organizations shared with the mission show GD with a healthy plurality, without factoring in the electoral advantages through intimidation and abuse of public resources, though the outcome is certainly not a foregone conclusion, particularly with further consolidation of the opposition.

One unanimous concern shared with the mission is the likelihood of instability and conflict following the elections. Given many stakeholders' distrust, often warranted, in the electoral process, if the opposition loses, the mission was told there would be widespread protests. In the scenario of an opposition victory, no one with whom the mission met believed that GD would concede, also resulting in civic unrest.

US and EU policymakers must prepare for different scenarios and develop a unified strategy for a volatile post-election period. Georgia's greatest asset has always been its democracy. Without it, the US and EU must question the relative value of any strategic partnership going forward.

### **Civil society and media landscape**

As reported in the May risk [assessment](#), Georgia was facing an unprecedented crisis this Spring. Hundreds of thousands of protestors, notable in a country of 3.5 million, were in the streets daily for over a month to protest a new foreign agents law. The opaque Georgian security services, clad in black and without insignias, physically attacked and arrested protestors. Media figures, civil society leaders, and opposition members also described to the mission how they were beaten in front of their offices and homes. (GD MPs have [openly stated](#) that they participated in some of the attacks.) Other civic actors have received threats, had their homes vandalized, and been doxed. Independent and opposition-leaning media outlets described having their technical equipment destroyed by the police during the riots. Although the protests quieted down over the summer, the intimidation has continued, and, according to the mission's interviews, no one has been brought to justice.

The foreign agents law went into effect while the mission was in Tbilisi, and [hundreds of organizations](#) have pledged not to comply. The law, mirroring [Russian legislation](#) passed in 2012, 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 -- including about people's [sexual lives](#) -- demand detailed reporting, and impose restrictions, fines, and prison sentences on individuals and groups deemed noncompliant. A [review](#) by the Venice Commission declares that the law is incompatible with democracy and human rights.

At the end of August, the Constitutional Court [held hearings](#) on five appeals filed against the law, including one from President Zurabishvili, arguing that the law is unconstitutional. The Court has made no decision on the cases yet nor responded to the plaintiffs' request that the law be temporarily stayed until a verdict.

Though the GD government publicly claims this law is needed to “enhance transparency,” GD leaders have privately shared, according to diplomats, that their real aim is to shut down a few leading watchdog organizations and media outlets that are critical of them. In fact, the government recently announced it would set up a fund to facilitate civil society organizations' compliance with the new procedures, indicating that its aim was not to hinder most groups. It is unclear what actions will be taken to enforce this legislation, but the law has cast a shadow over the election environment and was raised as a top concern in every meeting during the mission. Civil society and media representatives reported that they are living in a constant state of uncertainty and fear, as they could be fined or shut down imminently, and this impedes their ability to plan their election activities efficiently.

Independent and opposition media representatives also report their inability to operate effectively due to constant harassment and intimidation. One media representative told the mission, for example, that their cameraman covering protests in GD leader, and Russian oligarch, [Bidzina Ivanshvili](#)'s home town had all his equipment destroyed by secret service officials. There have been no investigations or arrests. Billboards have appeared declaring, “Journalists are bringing evil.” Several journalists allege that Russian FSB are in the country and supporting the Georgian security services. Journalists reported that the Communications Regulation Commission is also hampering their work by issuing baseless fines. Formula TV was told it must comply with the foreign agents law, though the outlet receives only Georgian funding. Further, journalists described hacking attacks on their emails and webpages.

Critically, independent media representatives explained to the mission that they had almost no financial support and could not compete with government-aligned Imedi TV in reaching voters. Access for independent journalists is also limited, as GD government officials refuse to communicate with them and prevent them from attending government events, inhibiting their ability to properly cover the election campaigns.

Leading disinformation organizations reported that Russian information operations were influencing the media environment in this pre-election period. They also described government-led information manipulation, including the establishment of fake accounts, many subsequently removed by META. They explained that the Kremlin and government-backed operations were in lockstep, sharing identical messages. For example, narratives of “sovereign democracy” -- making the case that Georgia has its “own” type of democracy and would not be “bullied” by European values on issues related to LGBT “propaganda” -- were being pumped out by Russian officials as well as government-backed social media sites. According to these disinformation groups, government-backed sites have also spread the message that the West is fomenting a coup in Georgia and is behind citizen protests. The messages warn of an upcoming “colored revolution” following the election, a narrative [amplified](#) by Russian intelligence services. The disinformation experts argued that the fear of war and conflict messages resonate with voters.

## Political playing field

A defining feature of Georgian politics over the past decade is the bipolar choice presented to voters -- GD or the former governing United National Movement (UNM). [Polling](#) consistently shows that while people give a low approval rating for GD, UNM garners an even more negative reaction, outside its loyal base. Though Georgians appear to dislike either option, and a majority repeatedly say they are undecided, no alternative party or coalition has emerged to capture the “double haters.” Instead, there has been a multitude of tiny and ever-dividing parties, with arguably undetectable ideological or policy differences, that fail to poll above one or two percent.

Though global [research](#) has shown that one unified opposition coalition is necessary to defeat a ruling party in a backsliding democracy, the small opposition parties in Georgia have failed to come together as one, whether due to personal grievances, historical disagreements, or ego. This lack of a united front is all the more problematic given the new 5% electoral threshold to enter parliament (the formula for which gives votes of those parties that fail to reach 5% to the party with the plurality, likely GD). To illustrate the challenge, if the 5% threshold had been in place during the 2020 elections, only two parties, GD and the UNM, instead of nine, would have been able to secure seats in the parliament.

While there is no unified opposition ticket, four opposition coalitions have formed: “Unity National Movement” with UNM, Strategy Aghmashenebeli Party, European Georgia Party; “Coalition for Changes” with Droa Party, Girchi-More Freedom Party, Ahali Party; “Strong Georgia” with Lelo Party, Freedom Square Movement, For People Party; and “For Georgia Party” under former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia.

People explained to the mission that the toxic nature of UNM presented a compelling argument against a fully united opposition, explaining that it could harm the other opposition parties by association, thereby aiding GD. As Gakharia said, “Voters are more afraid of UNM than even Russia.” But independent observers told the mission that narrowing the opposition field from four down to two choices –UNM-affiliated and non-UNM – would be beneficial to focus voters and avoid lost votes. However, in the mission’s meetings with the opposition groups, they all presented excuses as to why this was not possible, accusing the other groups of being a “poison pill” to voters. They argued that Strong Georgia was too connected to the “banker class,” Coalition for Changes was a UNM affiliate, and Gakharia was too close to GD, having served as Prime Minister, and was thus untrustworthy. (Strong Georgia representatives did, however, say they were open to negotiations with Gakharia.)

President Salome Zurbashvili described her efforts to unify the so-called non-UNM groups -- Strong Georgia and Gakharia -- into a Unity Platform of Neutrality. She drafted a “[Georgian Charter](#)” for the parties to commit to the [nine principles](#) put forward by the European Commission for Georgia’s EU candidacy. Because of the ban on electoral blocs, candidates would need to leave their current party and join a single party list. The president also would like the electoral list to include representatives from civil society. Her proposal promises a one-year

transition government of technocrats, and she would designate the prime minister from outside party politics. She acknowledged that her efforts to unite the two groups would be a challenge.

During the mission, there were several discussions about whether the opposition party groups could at least rally behind one prime minister candidate. Failure to do so, some argued, could create doubts among voters about the ability of the opposition to govern, should they be victorious, since they cannot agree on a common candidate. Party representatives indicated that agreeing on a candidate would be difficult, for similar reasons they are reluctant to unite on one ticket.

It is difficult to know where the parties stand in terms of voter opinion, and their chances of clearing the threshold. Unfortunately, the most reliable polls in the country – those conducted by NDI and IRI – are no longer released publicly. They were essential in grounding the public in reality. Therefore, Georgia is awash in suspect and contradictory data, and every party cites their figures as exponentially higher than they likely are. This could lead to bad decision-making about their campaigns and alliances. Independent pollsters shared privately that while all four party groups are likely to meet the threshold, GD is in a strong position with a sizeable plurality of support.

### **Campaign messaging**

The opposition groups are mostly running on the message that the election is a choice between the West and Russia. They believe GD's rhetoric on Western allies, calling American and European leaders the "[global war party](#)," repetition of Kremlin [talking points](#) about a "second front" in the war, and passage of the Russia-inspired foreign agents law have turned voters against the government. With a few exceptions, opposition parties did not outline concise economic agendas and were confident that Georgian voters viewed the election in existential foreign policy terms, not economic ones.

Public opinion researchers and several civic groups, however, warned that Georgians do not rank the country's foreign policy direction among the top most important issues and would vote based on economic concerns – jobs, wages, pensions, and trade. For example, they reported that Georgians want to continue trade with Russia and fear the opposition would introduce sanctions (though the opposition parties did not report they would enforce sanctions). And while the opposition believes anti-government sentiment is strong, [polling](#) from the Caucasus Barometer shows that there has been an *increase* in trust in many government institutions over the past year, including trust in police (55%), even after the brutal crackdown on protestors this Spring. The same polling shows only 35% of Georgians disapprove of the foreign agents law, while one-third approve and the rest do not know or care.

GD has several campaign tactics and narratives, many of which, as described above, are supported and amplified by Russia. First, GD is presenting the choice in the election as one of war versus peace. They argue that the opposition (which they have labelled as all "[collective UNM](#)") will drag Georgia into conflict. This fear-based message, according to virtually all interviewees, was a powerful one. Several civic leaders explained that Georgians were right to be concerned about conflict as they had not seen security guarantees from the West.

The GD campaign is also attempting to sell the message that the party is still pro-EU – including images of the EU flag on their billboards -- despite the party’s [critical](#) and [insulting](#) rhetoric toward the EU and continued rejection of the reforms outlined for candidacy status. In threading this needle, GD leaders claim that they can join the EU on their “own terms” and “with dignity,” meaning that they could skirt EU requirements and press through with legislation restricting human rights in conflict with EU values. GD leaders point out that there are other illiberal EU members, and Georgia could join the ranks of Hungary. So rather than comply with EU measures, GD is campaigning on “traditional values,” passing [anti-LGBTQ legislation](#), which would not only restrict rights but limit free speech and assembly, and introducing measures to [designate](#) the Georgian Orthodox Church as the state’s religion. As Bidzina Ivanishvili summarized, the election is a [choice](#) between “war and peace,” “slavery and independence,” and “moral degradation and Christian values.”

GD has also announced an unusual campaign [promise](#) to eliminate opposition parties and cancel opposition seats in parliament should they win a constitutional majority. In an Orwellian [dictate](#), GD’s political council elaborated on the pledge explaining that to establish democracy, they first must destroy it. Bidzina Ivanishvili [added](#) that following the elections, there would be “Nuremberg trials” for the opposition and the network of “foreign agents,” pledging to erase GD’s opponents.

### **Election framework and observation**

As reported in May, an [agreement](#) among the political parties brokered by the President of the European Council Charles Michel and EU [candidacy requirements](#) called for several electoral reforms. At the time of the mission, GD has still not complied. For example, Georgia was required to pass legislation to lower the threshold for parliamentary elections to 2%. This has not happened. Further, GD agreed to appoint Central Election Committee professional members through a two-thirds vote in parliament in order to ensure multi-party consensus. However, the ruling party violated this agreement and appointed leadership to the CEC through a simple majority, a move [criticized](#) by the Venice Commission and ODIHR. There has been no effort to reinstate the two-thirds agreement, and the current CEC leadership lacks the trust of opposition contenders, as confirmed in mission interviews with all opposition groups. CEC leaders acknowledged the opposition’s distrust in their work but dismissed efforts to build confidence as “hopeless.” An election process in which only the ruling party has faith in the election administration presents risks for guaranteeing trust in the legitimacy of the outcome.

Another risk to the upcoming elections is ongoing concern about the ability of Georgia’s experienced and professional non-partisan election observation organizations to operate. The major nonpartisan election observation groups, Transparency International (TI), International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), have refused to comply with the new foreign agents law and are now exposed to potential fines and possible seizure of accounts, office raids, and other forms of intimidation. Already the offices of election organizations have been vandalized and their leaders threatened. While observer groups are confident that they will not lose their CEC accreditation to

observe, they are worried that some of their volunteers will be prevented from monitoring at the polling stations on election day or that legal problems could hinder their ability to work.

The head of the CEC guaranteed that regardless of observer organizations' decision not to comply with the foreign agents law, they would still be allowed to observe the elections.

In addition to using the foreign agents law to present obstacles to observer groups, the GD government has engaged in campaigns [to discredit](#) election monitoring for some time, in an attempt 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. During the mission, observer groups reported that the government has only increased its efforts to discredit them, accusing them of being an arm of the “collective UNM.”

Despite this environment of intimidation, observer organizations are forging ahead, actively recruiting observers and developing contingency plans for various roadblocks. Several large foreign-funded observer groups, including TI and GYLA, have formed a coalition that includes many smaller, local CSOs to serve as observers should anything happen to their observation accreditation (for failure to comply with the foreign agents law). ISFED is planning to conduct its parallel vote tabulation to verify the official election results, which will be particularly important given lack of trust in the CEC and public concerns about the new electronic counting process (see May risk [assessment](#)).

In evaluating the pre-election environment to date, Georgian observers told the mission that familiar tactics of government intimidation and abuse of state resources are underway. They reported to the mission that government officials are threatening voters with the loss of government assistance if they vote for the opposition. Forms of vote buying are also prevalent, and observers point to newly announced road construction projects, the provision of “paid internships” in the public sector, tax waiver schemes for select individuals and businesses, pension increases, and agro-credit schemes. The observer organizations described one case of a former GD official whistleblower who has disclosed a comprehensive spreadsheet listing teachers and state employees across the country and their voting preference, which he claims is being used for targeted GD pressure campaigns.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The September mission to Georgia confirmed the shortcomings identified in the May assessment and established new ones. Heading into the October elections, Georgia faces longstanding challenges— ruling party intimidation, abuse of state resources, and vote buying; an uneven playing field between the government and opposition; an information space dominated by government media and flooded with disinformation; lack of trust in the elections process; and a fractured opposition. New concerns have also emerged. With the foreign agents law in effect, nonpartisan election observation groups could be subject to fines, arrests, and other punitive measures limiting or cancelling their monitoring efforts. Similarly, independent media coverage

and investigations could be limited due to pressure on or penalties against journalists and media outlets. The next month will be critical.

Since the last assessment, the GD government has escalated its fear-mongering and anti-democratic rhetoric, spreading disinformation – with aid from the Kremlin -- about Western allies dragging the country into war and promising to eliminate the opposition and multi-party democracy full-stop.

Georgian Dream is in a good position -- helped by intimidation tactics, abuse of state resources, control of the CEC, and the leftover votes of smaller parties that fail to clear the threshold -- to secure a plurality, if not a majority, in the elections. To form a government, they may need to entice other MPs to join, which is historically not difficult to do in Georgia. According to the mission interviews, a GD victory will likely result in allegations of election manipulation and street protests, with subsequent police crackdowns and possible violence. It is also possible that the opposition groups together secure more votes than GD and come together to declare victory, but no one believes GD would concede in that scenario. According to the narratives GD and the Kremlin have already preemptively laid out, GD will accuse the West of manipulation and spurring a “colored revolution” and declare a state of emergency. This scenario will also result in protests, crackdowns, and possible violence. The Kremlin has [promised](#) its assistance to GD.

Either way, the mission was repeatedly told that post-election instability is likely, and it is unclear how it would end – the determination of the protestors and commitment of police and military to fight their own people are unknown.

The previous risk assessment outlined several recommendations for Georgian civil society, and this mission found that they were delivering. Groups are raising public awareness about the elections and electronic voting, election monitors have developed contingency plans and data collection safeguards, and many observer organizations have come together in one coalition.

The mission revealed two areas of caution for Georgian political parties – the presumption that voters have turned on GD and will vote based on the country’s foreign policy direction; and the underestimation of the power of the fear of war. A recommendation for party campaigns would be to develop and disseminate messages to preempt the “threat of war” narratives, present concrete economic policy solutions, and explain why foreign policy -- aligning with the West -- is the path to prosperity as well as security. The opposition parties would also benefit from putting aside differences to form a unified ticket, or, at least, only two opposition groupings. Unification is not only a matter of the mathematical sum of parts, but also presents greater clarity of choice (rather than a crowded playing field) to voters and signals to the public an ability to govern.

As for Western partners, the one resounding message mission delegates heard from Georgians was, “Stop the ‘business as usual’ approach to the Georgian government.” They argued that Georgian leaders should not be platformed at international events nor treated as a trusted ally. As one leader said, “Take them at their word – if they say publicly that you are the enemy, you are their enemy, no matter what they whisper behind closed doors.”



US and EU policymakers should take actions ahead of the elections to signal to the GD government concern about anti-democratic actions taken, including implementation of the foreign agents law:

- While the EU needs unanimity on various sanctions actions, targeted travel bans could be introduced for GD leaders who voted for the foreign agents law.
- The US Congress should move forward with legislation to demonstrate accountability for the GD government, which continues to message to voters that it has US support, and the US is “bluffing.”
- USG should consider personal and financial sanctions for select GD leaders, including Ivanishvili.
- EU could consider a pause in visa-free travel for Georgians. Though controversial, several Georgian NGOs argued persuasively to the mission that this action would demonstrate in real terms to voters the consequences of GD government actions.
- US and EU aid agencies should support Georgian civil society in non-compliance with the foreign agents law, including offsetting costs of possible fines and legal fees. There should be no mixed messages from the international community about objection to the law and no efforts to support compliance (trainings, etc.).
- Increased financial support to independent media is needed, particularly regional outlets.
- US and EU leaders should publicly articulate serious doubts about the legitimacy of any election process conducted with hampered nonpartisan observation and failed electoral reform.

Following the elections, the US and EU need to prepare for different scenarios and instability and should be in lockstep on how to evaluate the elections and on future engagement with the next government.

- The international community must stand behind the findings from trusted domestic and international observers about the integrity of the elections. The result of Parallel Vote Tabulations (PVTs) and exit polls will also be critical in validating the official CEC election results.
- The EU and US should invest significantly in post-election observer efforts, including high-level international delegations to monitor developments and demonstrate support for Georgian civil society immediately after election day. The US should consider a bipartisan congressional delegation in the weeks following the elections to bolster Georgian observers, support citizen protestors, and possibly serve as a deterrent against violence and politically motivated arrests and prosecutions.
- If GD is victorious – validated by observers – the international community will need to closely monitor the post-election environment, particularly the government’s response to anticipated protests. Another GD term is likely to advance the illiberal playbook, further suppression of civil society and adoption of controversial legislation to limit rights, out of compliance with EU reforms. It appears unlikely, though not impossible, that GD would secure the two-thirds majority needed to eliminate the political opposition and deny opposition MPs’ their mandates.
  - The EU should consider suspending Georgia’s candidate status until 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.

- If it hasn't already, Congress should move forward with legislation on Georgia if GD does not remove the foreign agents law and continues forward with anti-human rights legislation (such as LGBTQ restrictions).
- If Georgia continues its autocratic trajectory, the international community will ultimately need to determine: 1) the *value* of any partnership with an autocratic Georgian government, particularly if the anti-Western rhetoric continues; and 2) whether a GD government is a reliable partner (particularly for sharing intelligence or cooperation on anti-terrorism efforts), given links with Russia, as well as China and Iran.
- In the possibility of an opposition victory, the EU and US will no doubt forcefully advocate for the peaceful transfer of power. Any GD obstruction would necessitate a permanent cessation of international assistance to and cooperation with the government, sanctions, and revocation of EU candidacy status.
- If the CEC declares GD the winner but observation groups were significantly obstructed or declare serious irregularities rendering the results not credible, international pressure will be essential to ensure a thorough complaints adjudication process, audits, recounts, and a new election, if necessary.
- Regardless of outcome, support to Georgian civil society should be robust, particularly watchdog and independent media organizations. Creative financing avenues, as used in Azerbaijan, may need to be explored if civil society space closes. Lifelines to the Georgian people, who overwhelming support EU and NATO membership, should be continued through civil society engagement and public diplomacy efforts.

This report is offered in the spirit of democratic partnership with the aim of encouraging free and fair elections in October and a peaceful transition to the next administration.