



Policy Briefing  
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# Does Democracy Still Matter in Georgia?

By Lincoln Mitchell

**M**ore than a quarter of century after once again achieving independence, fourteen years after the Rose Revolution, and five years after the democratic breakthrough that defeated the United National Movement (UNM), the state of democracy in Georgia is still mixed. The recent local elections were generally reviewed with the same mixture of **generally positive assessments**, alongside reports of all too many instances of the governing

## BOTTOM LINE

- Georgia's fading Euro-Atlantic integration prospects undermine democratic development.
- Continued reform momentum is increasingly the province of local actors and agendas.
- The possibility of democratic regression in Georgia is real, but also more likely to trigger domestic dissatisfaction.

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Georgian Dream (GD) seeking to pressure voters to support them or [otherwise abuse their power](#).

Similarly, while new constitutional reforms will do some things to make democracy stronger—like slowly move towards a fully party list system for parliamentary elections—it will also weaken democracy by moving away from direct elections for the President. The process itself was not done well, leaving many political forces outside of the GD feeling left out, angry, and dissatisfied. The strains from the process may have undermined perceptions of GD’s democratic credentials within the country and externally.

Despite all this, in five years in power, GD has not cracked down on civil liberties or media freedoms to an extent comparable to their predecessors, or to regimes in most of the surrounding countries. On balance, the democracy curve is still in the right direction, but meaningful progress has been inconsistent.

### Democracy Still Matters

The analytical question is so what? More broadly, at a time when democratic rollback in much of the West has somewhat naturally occurred alongside a decreasing commitment to democracy assistance, and when Russia’s role in the West is a much more prominent and divisive issue, how relevant is Georgia’s

democratic development to its future security and success?

Of course, these trends should not be overstated. Western powers have not entirely walked away from the democratization process in Georgia. The Venice Commission was very involved in evaluating the constitutional reform process. Numerous western organizations observed the recent local elections. Donors like USAID continue to support an array of civil society organizations that are doing good work in Georgia. Nonetheless, the West has lost a great deal of leverage, and interest, in their efforts to promote democracy everywhere, including Georgia.

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Additionally, as Georgia has settled into a state of semi-democracy—where progress is slow and sometimes stalled, but

where a return to a more authoritarian system, the protests of a few remaining UNM loyalists notwithstanding, is unlikely—international pressure for greater democracy has, perhaps naturally, waned. Georgia is just democratic enough to escape severe recrimination, particularly compared to its far more problematic neighborhood, but not so democratic that its institutions and culture are considered consolidated by any honest assessment.

A decade or so ago, one of the primary things that made Georgia important and valuable to the west was that it

was viewed as a democracy. This is why the UNM government always placed so much [effort on trying to show its democratic bona fides](#) to the rest of the world, even when the domestic reality was quite different.

Today, supporters of Georgia continue to praise its democratic accomplishments, but that is no longer the [rhetorical lynchpin](#) of a special relationship as it was during the Bush-Saakashvili years. Instead, Georgia's support from the West today increasingly lies in its role as a kind of bulwark against Moscow. This framing began in the late UNM years, but continues today. It is also complex because, at least in the U.S., there are powerful forces at the highest levels of government with friendly ties to Russia. Nonetheless, this, not democracy, is now Tbilisi's calling card in Western capitals.

### **Intrinsic Motivations**

Given that NATO and EU membership is a long way off and that there are few countries for whom Georgia's internal democracy is a major criterion by which relations are formed, the question of democracy's relevance in Georgia now is therefore a domestic one. For those Georgians (and foreigners) who care about Georgia, who have long touted the need for greater democracy there, this situation presents a test. If democracy

was always something that was mostly a way to win international approbation, then there is no need to continue to advocate for more democratic reform in Georgia.

However, for those who genuinely believe in democracy as not simply the most just and fair way to govern, but the most effective as well, the need for stronger democracy in Georgia is just as urgent as ever. For those who believe that democracy is the best political system for assuring domestic tranquility, economic growth, and stability, it is clear that Georgia needs more democracy. Those who don't believe this are not democrats and have merely instrumentalized the notion of democracy to further yet another political agenda.

Georgian democracy today is probably stronger than at most points in its recent history, but problems and potential problems remain. The recent resounding victory by the GD in the local election again raises the specter of one party dominance; the role of GD founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, while frequently overstated by GD opponents, is nonetheless problematic; lines between state and party still need to be clarified and respected; freedom of media, while stronger than five or ten years ago, still needs to be ensured; and an enduring and cohesive party system has yet to

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emerge. These concerns are genuine, but not quite damning.

Georgia can continue for the immediate future without addressing these problems and remain a relatively free semi-democratic country. However, it will not become a consolidated democracy until these challenges are resolved.

### What Next?

The next chapter in Georgia's quest for democracy will be unlike any previous one, as this work will not only have to be done internally, but the motivations and incentives will have to be internal as well. Over the course of the last 25 years, there have been moments where the commitment to democracy in Georgia seemed real, but these are significantly outnumbered by moments when the rhetorical commitment to democracy was just that, rhetoric, with little follow through.

The Georgian government and its Western partners should recognize democracy is now important for continued domestic stability in Georgia. For its part, the U.S. should signal its ongoing interest in democracy in Georgia by including messages not just about Georgia's progress in this regard, but about the

need to consolidate and deepen these advances, in all aspects of the bilateral relationship. The US should also frame this increasingly in the language of partnership rather than mentorship or attempts to teach Georgia something.

The U.S. and Europe can best continue supporting democracy in Georgia by encouraging the articulation of policy and political demands by the Georgian people. The US should recognize that democracy is about process and that as long as

ideas, even ones we may not like, are debated through increasingly democratic means, democracy will become stronger. Accordingly, U.S. programs should move towards efforts to give voice to a range of interests and cultivate pluralism in Georgia.

The Georgian government today faces much less pressure for

democracy than at most times in over the last quarter century, making it very easy for them to deemphasize democratic reform. The problem with that approach, at least in the view of this democrat, is that it will lead to domestic dissatisfaction, a stagnant economy, and a failure to solve Georgia's pressing problems. Democracy is as relevant as ever in Georgia, but for reasons that were not always stressed in the past. ♦

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### About the Author

**Dr. Lincoln Mitchell** is an EDSN fellow and a writer, pundit, and specialist in political development based in New York City and San Francisco. Dr. Mitchell has worked on democracy and governance related issues in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. He also works with businesses and NGOs globally, particularly in the former Soviet Union. Dr. Mitchell writes and speaks about US politics as well, and was the national political correspondent for The New York Observer from 2014-2016. Dr. Mitchell was also on the faculty of Columbia University's School of International Affairs from 2006-2013 and worked for years as a political consultant in New York City advising and managing domestic political campaigns.

### About EDSN

The **Eurasia Democratic Security Network** (EDSN) is a project by the Center for Social Sciences with the generous funding of National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The project aims to cultivate an international network of scholars and practitioners to further develop the intellectual and public policy rationale for the maintenance of Euro-Atlantic conditionality as a peacemaking and economic dynamizing force. Particularly aimed to aspirant states, EDSN also advocates for liberal democratization on its own merits, such as through the increasingly and variously established linkages between democracy, national security, and economic development.



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