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The Countdown to Save Georgia's Democracy is On: An Assessment

By Medea Turashvili

The October 2024 parliamentary elections left Georgians grappling with questions, concerns and deep emotions for what lies ahead amid existential risks to our democracy and sovereignty—including the security threat from Russia, a derailed EU integration process, and the rise of authoritarianism. Based on emerging evidence, there is a little doubt that Georgia's October 26 elections were improperly manipulated to a degree that influenced the official results.

BOTTOM LINE

- Georgia's elections were manipulated using intimidation and irregularities.
- Opposition discipline and civil society is vital to preserving freedoms.
- International pressure is essential to hold Georgian Dream accountable.

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Manipulation occurred on two fronts: 1) pre-election physical, psychological and financial intimidation, including but not limited to the use of administrative resources, bribery and threats to socially vulnerable groups; and 2) large-scale, well-coordinated irregularities on election day. Although some observers documented many of these manipulations and irregularities, the scale took many civil society and political groups by surprise.

I volunteered for a well-known Georgian election observer group and was assigned to monitor and document violations reported by some 40 election observers in three regions of western Georgia, including the hometown of Georgian oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili.

By 08:00, it was clear that ruling party proxies were heavily monitoring the polling stations with video cameras. By 11:00, it was evident that voters were being mobilized and controlled by ruling party coordinators and other proxies who had gathered near polling stations. Around the same time, observers reported that the secrecy of the vote was being violated because the ballots used in the electronic voting were so thin that voters' choices were visible on the other side of the ballot through the traces of markers given to voters to fill in their choices.

By midday, observers documented the infiltration of the ruling party into the district election commissions, whose members openly expressed their preference for Georgian Dream. Election day was also marked by intimidation and physical assault against some of our observers. It did not take long to understand that the elections were neither free nor fair and that a large part of

the Georgian electorate, especially in non-urban rural regions, was deprived of a free choice. Election-related complaints filed by observers and opposition parties with the courts and the election commission were not resolved in the vast majority of cases.

If the Georgian Dream remains in power now, it will be even more difficult to vote them out in the next elections. This is due to the fact that since coming to power in 2012, the ruling party has systematically captured all state institutions, not only the judiciary, prosecutors or election commissions, but even the education system, where school directors are political appointees tasked with intimidating and pressuring teachers.

Over the past decade, the size of the bureaucracy has increased significantly, driven by nepotism and cronyism in the recruitment process;

almost 18% of the Georgian population is a recipient of the social allowance, a historic level, which allows the government to leverage payments for political purposes, particularly in rural areas.

The degree and scale of Georgian Dream's investment in altering the election results shows that it has the will and resources to do the same in subsequent elections. As a result, Georgia risks becoming hostage to power-hungry and financially motivated individuals for years, if not decades, to come. The country faces the prospect of losing active and politically engaged citizens to emigration, while the silent majority will be increasingly inundated with Russian-style

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propaganda about "sovereign democracy," liberal values, foreign agents, LGBTQ rights,

These risks are too high to ignore. The immediate goal of opposition groups, society at large, and Georgia's Western partners should be to ensure that Georgian Dream remains under national and international pressure to respect the will of the Georgian people.

In the immediate future, Georgian opposition parties need to form a closer alliance and speak with one voice on their election-related demands. While three opposition factions—Unity-National Movement, Coalition for Change, and Strong Georgia—are unified in their calls for international investigation and early elections under international administration, former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's For Georgia party has made similar demands separately.

Gakharia must stop being coquettish and join the opposition bloc, and there should be an unconditional rally around incumbent president Salome Zurbishvili as the leader of the opposition movement.

The opposition has chosen demonstrations as one of its strategies. They are calling for peaceful and prolonged rallies, mostly in the capital. Mobilizing the people, especially the youth, is important.

Georgia maintains a free civil society, even though it is verbally, physically, and psychologically attacked by government-controlled media, party proxies, and

etc.

propaganda machines on social networks. Most civil society organizations have chosen not to register foreign agents under the controversial law that passed earlier this year. The post-election period shows that they are not giving up. Human rights and watchdog groups are employing legal mechanisms to challenge the election results in the courts. In addition, a new type of non-violent resistance is being organized by young people, academics, artistic and cultural circles, feminist groups, etc. This movement is gaining strength and should be supported by Georgia's partners. Their

activism helps protect civil liberties and freedoms in the country.

Georgian civil society should discourage emigration. As we have seen from Belarus and Azerbaijan, large-scale emigration

bolsters the regime's efforts to close the civic space. To the best extent possible, Georgian civil society should remain in Georgia, and Georgia's Western partners should use all available means, such as high-level platforms and political leverage, to support them. It is important to rethink the assistance mechanisms, in particular to provide funding to social movements, individual activists and defenders, and informal groups.

Meanwhile, Georgian civil society, social movements, and activist groups, already labelled as foreign agents, have little to lose in terms of their reputation. Soon, Georgian

"If Georgian Dream stays in power, it will be even harder to vote them out, as they have captured state institutions, from judiciary to education, using them as political tools."

Dream will be knocking on their doors. They should come to the forefront of the political struggle and align with the political opposition to achieve the annulment of the election results.

The elephants in the room are Georgia's Orthodox Church, which openly supports Georgian Dream, and the security apparatus, which the ruling party relies on, especially to suppress activists, dissent, and demonstrations. The opposition should try to find allies in these institutions and secure defections from them. Similarly, defections by high-ranking officials and diplomats will weaken GD's power.

Creating internal divisions within the regime can be achieved if it is coupled with international pressure from above. The following actions should be taken immediately and decisively:

Georgia's partners should not recognize the election results and legitimize the government until there is a credible international investigation of election violations. Communicate this clearly to the government and the population. EU's upcoming evaluations on Georgia should have a clear messages for the government.

Georgian Dream members, their political and financial, those aiding the electoral violations and their families should be sanctioned by both the U.S. and the EU and its member states, including travel restrictions and asset freezes. This should be communicated clearly to the government and the population.

"Georgia's civil society remains resilient, using peaceful resistance, legal challenges, and public demonstrations to demand respect for democratic rights despite intimidation."

While more than 600,000 Georgians receive state social assistance, 16 of the 89 Georgian Dream deputies who won seats in the new parliament as a result of rigged elections are millionaires. Apart from them, Georgian Dream members and their allies own property and businesses in the West, enjoy lavish vacations in famous Western resorts and cities. All these luxuries should be denied. Election rigging, state capture, and human rights violations are all good reasons for swift sanctions.

Last but not least, the Georgian elections should be seen from a geopolitical perspective: it was a piece of a larger puzzle

of Russia's interference in the affairs of its neighbors (Moldova, Belarus) through support for pro-Russian groups, disinformation, and threats. Recent report shows how Russian intelligence has penetrated key strategic IT

infrastructure of Georgia, including the Central Election Commission. Russia's aggressive war in Ukraine has and will have a detrimental effect on Georgia. The Georgian Dream will likely maintain its power as long as Russia is strong, remains in the region, and continues to support the Georgian Dream.

In contrast, we have not seen any bold reactions from either the US or the EU. While there are no effective sanctions against the oligarch and GD officials responsible for rigging the elections, there are rumors that EU visa liberalization for Georgians will be revoked. European leaders did not have

much time to discuss Georgia at the Fifth European Political Community (EPC) Summit in Budapest, Hungary, but these conversations are certain to be raised before long.

Georgians will continue to protest. But this will eventually lead to a political, economic, financial, and social crisis. The longer the crisis lasts, the longer the Georgian people will suffer. More decisive and immediate steps are needed from all levels—domestic and international—to ensure that election violations are investigated, the choice of the Georgian people is respected, and there is a political dialogue on power sharing. ♦

Medea Turashvili is a DSI non-resident scholar and former EDSN fellow with over ten years of experience in research, analysis, and advocacy with organizations like the Ombudsman’s Office of Georgia, International Crisis Group, and the European Centre for Minority Issues. She specializes in conflicts, human rights, forced migration, and social transformation in the South Caucasus. Medea has authored articles for publications such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies and International Alert. She is currently a PhD candidate at Tbilisi State University, researching conflict escalation. She holds an MA in Conflict Studies and Human Rights from Utrecht University and a BA in Political Science from Middle East Technical University in Turkey. Her expertise includes conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and minority rights.

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Through a robust network of scholars, EDSN fellows, and alumni—spanning policymakers, journalists, analysts, and academics—DSI provides a platform for collaborative policy development in the service of democratic security. Our goal is to bridge the gap between policy ideas and practical political reforms that support democratic stability across the region, often in challenging environments. DSI promotes reforms in governance, foreign policy, and public institutions to ensure that citizens across the region have a meaningful stake in their futures.



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