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ARMENIA AND GEORGIA 2024. ELECTIONS: CHOICES AND SELECTION IN A TURBULENT WORLD

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Armenia and Georgia 2024. Elections: Choices and Selection in a Turbulent World – Jakhua, M., Madoyan, G. et al

This publication is a collection of articles from the Armenia – Georgia Neighborhood: Experts' Dialogue, which took place in Armenia on November 3, 2024. The articles analyze the current development trends in the South Caucasus within regional and international security challenges, with a specific focus on elections. The event was co-organized by the Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts (Georgia), the Armenian Committee of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (Armenia), and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom South Caucasus.

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1. Preface

Before you, there is a collection of articles based on the meeting named “Armenia - Georgia Neighbourhood: Expert Dialogue - Armenia and Georgia 2024. Elections: Choices and selections in a turbulent world”. This meeting took place on November 3, 2024. Since the meeting took place immediately after the elections in Georgia and on the eve of the elections in the USA, it was quite natural that the central topic of the meeting was elections - their dynamics, impact on the region, geopolitical challenges, prospects for the relations between Georgia and Armenia both at the governmental and societal levels, dichotomy of free choice vs. choice and selection; Eight authors, four from each side, tried to analyse the processes related to the elections and to outline possible scenarios for the development of events both at the local, regional and broader levels; at the same time, they tried to identify those links between past and ongoing events that connect and will determine Georgian-Armenian relations in the future.

Although the participants had different views and evaluated the events in our countries in different ways, the different and multi-level of views and evaluations helped to reflect

and create channels for future communication. The presented reports look at these issues from various perspectives, finding overlapping interests and different moments.

The past meeting is part of the unique format of the Armenian-Georgian expert dialogue process, which has existed for ten years. Within its framework, meetings are held regularly, alternately in Yerevan and Tbilisi, with breaks of several months in between. This expert forum aims to foster closer cooperation between Armenian and Georgian experts working on Armenian-Georgian and regional issues and involve the broader public in discussing matters of vital importance to the two countries and the region. Security, democratic development, economy, human rights, media, current trends in society, electoral processes, and orientation projects have been discussed openly and in depth within the framework of this dialogue. During this long-term period, a new generation of experts has joined the format of the Georgian-Armenian expert dialogue, which underscores the strength and necessity of the format. After all, one of the goals of creating such a permanent platform was to fill the gap in the relationship

between the new generation of scientists and analysts who deal with similar issues and do not have close professional and human relations.

We are grateful to the Friedrich Naumann Foundation and its office in the South Caucasus for their continued support of the Armenia-Georgia Expert Dialogue, which promotes ideas and draws attention to the democratic and liberal values on which our format is based and continues to evolve.

Nino Kalendarishvili

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2. Elections and Freedom of Choice in Georgia and Armenia: Certain Uncertainty vs “Stability and Peace”

Misha Jakhua

November 2024

The 2024 elections in Georgia differed significantly from previous parliamentary elections in terms of both formal and procedural innovations and the choice presented to voters during the pre-election process by both the government and the opposition.

Electoral Innovations and Exhaustive Administration

For the first time, parliamentary elections were held **under a fully proportional system**, with a 5% electoral threshold.

The transition to a proportional system, considering Georgia’s electoral experience, raised expectations for competitive elections. This shift was influenced by the experience of parliamentary elections held since 2012, during which the ruling Georgian Dream party had never won outright in the proportional system. Instead, the party secured overall victories thanks to results achieved under the majoritarian system.

The 2024 parliamentary elections indirectly served as **presidential elections**.

Based on the 2010 constitutional reform, the last two presidents of Georgia held largely symbolic roles, though they were still directly elected by the people. During the Georgian Dream’s rule, the presidency gained a unique role depending on the electoral procedure and constitutional powers. Both Giorgi Margvelashvili and Salome Zourabichvili were balancing figures during internal and external crises. When questions arose about the country’s foreign policy, both presidents voiced strongly pro-European stances. Domestically, when the ruling party implemented harsh policies against its opponents, the presidency often mediated and maintained its neutrality.

Following the 2018 constitutional reform, direct presidential elections were abolished. Instead, a 300-member commission would choose the president. Since the Georgian Parliament participates fully in this process, the results of parliamentary elections heavily influence the presidential election. Given the current polarization, it is

plausible that no institution will remain simultaneously trusted by the public and acceptable to political players.

These were the first regular elections conducted predominantly using **an electronic voting system**.

Electronic voting was planned for 90% of voters during the parliamentary elections. Key components of election administration used electronic technologies, including voter registration at polling stations through ID or passport verification machines, replacing previously printed lists. Optical scanning technology was also implemented for ballot boxes, requiring voters to insert their ballots into the box in a specific orientation.

Electoral Administration

Legislative changes and staff shifts within the Central Election Commission (CEC) significantly impacted perceptions of the elections and trust in their outcomes.

One component of the action plan mediated by European Council President Charles Michel after the 2020 parliamentary elections aimed to resolve the political crisis through electoral reform. According to the agreed-upon legislative changes,

selecting the CEC Chair required consensus among political parties, with candidates presented to Parliament by a president enjoying broad public trust. Additionally, reforms were introduced to increase opposition parties' participation in the commission and enhance existing procedures.

However, the government later declared the agreement void, reversing progress in election commission reforms. Over three years, Giorgi Kalandarishvili (the current CEC Chair) was elected four times, with election rules changed repeatedly to ensure his appointment. The president vetoed electoral code amendments four times but was ultimately excluded from the process. As a result, the CEC Chair and members were elected solely by the ruling party's simple majority.

Ahead of the 2024 elections, the ruling party altered decision-making processes within the CEC, allowing decisions without opposition consensus. Another major change introduced just weeks before the election redefined the roles of polling station commission members.

Pre-Election Political Environment

Before the official election campaign, Georgian Dream initiated

a series of public processes that shaped the election agenda and framed its election messages. One of these processes was the attempt to adopt the “Foreign Agent Law” in 2023, targeting non-governmental organizations. Although the process was halted amidst public protests, the ruling party drew some valuable conclusions from what appeared to be an unsuccessful endeavor.

On one hand, it became evident that such efforts required more strategic planning. On the other hand, the process served as a tool for Georgian Dream to consolidate its ranks. All members of the Georgian Dream who did not vote in favor of the law were forced to leave the party and parliament, effectively sterilizing internal dissent.

In early 2024, the Foreign Agent Law resurfaced unexpectedly, rebranded with cosmetic changes as the “Foreign Influence Transparency Law.” While public protests against the law were anticipated, the purpose of reintroducing it then was unclear. At first glance, the necessity of this initiative and its potential benefits for the Georgian Dream were not obvious.

However, based on current observations, this seemingly harmful move seems to have yielded several advantages for the “Dream.” **Firstly**, by redirecting the focus of public outrage to an artificially created issue, they managed **to slow the intensity of the emotional reaction**. This shift left public anger insufficiently charged for meaningful protests after the elections.

Secondly, since the law directly targeted the non-governmental sector, it drew these organizations into the fight as active participants. This strategy framed the parliamentary elections as a direct confrontation between the Georgian Dream and the civil sector. Consequently, post-election statements from observation missions regarding electoral violations were perceived as biased, **as the civil sector had become an interested party**.

Election Campaign and Key Messages

The election campaign effectively became an extension of earlier political processes. Within this framework, it was transformed into a stark choice between “war and peace.” Those who supported a pro-Western course were labeled as advocates for war, while the Georgian Dream positioned itself as the sole guarantor of “peace.”

The pre-election messaging of Georgian Dream drew heavily on their 12 years in power. They emphasized the absence of open hostilities during this period, highlighted the realistic threat of aggression from Russia, and fostered the perception that Western support, in their view, was insufficient during both the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the current crisis in Ukraine. Simultaneously, they framed economic stability as a product of the peace secured through their governance. Through indirect hints and abstract references to a “party of global war,” Georgian Dream portrayed the West as a supporter of Ukraine and as a proponent of conflict. Similarly, they framed the pro-Western stance and solidarity of the opposition with Ukraine as a potential trigger for war. Consequently, Georgian Dream’s core pre-election narrative was that the parliamentary elections represented **a referendum on war versus peace.**

The opposition countered this narrative primarily with a moral critique, focusing on the depiction of tragic scenes from the ongoing war in Ukraine in Georgian Dream’s campaign materials and the ruling party’s policy of avoiding provocation with Russia. Their alternative message introduced the concept of “real peace,” emphasizing the need for

societal harmony and asserting that the current situation did not constitute true peace.

Messages related to war and peace likely influenced undecided voters. While the tragic imagery of the war in Ukraine was deemed immoral by some, it also indirectly underscored Russia’s brutality, instilling fear of Russia without explicitly labeling it as an enemy. Georgian Dream leveraged this fear by presenting itself as a force capable of “controlling the monster.” For a population repeatedly affected by war, “peace” has come to signify the absence of conflict for many Georgians.

Like Georgian Dream, opposition parties framed the election campaign as a continuation of pre-election processes. Most opposition parties positioned the elections **as a referendum between Russia and Europe.** This message was reinforced by several legislative acts passed by the ruling party that openly contradicted the process of European integration. The ruling party’s harsh rhetoric toward Western partners, echoed by various officials, further fueled this narrative. In response, European institutions openly criticized the adopted laws—such as the law on non-governmental organizations and the anti-LGBT leg-

isolation—stating that they effectively halted the process of European integration. The opposition built its campaign on this reality, highlighting the support Georgia had received from the EU and the United States and the potential benefits at risk due to the suspension of the integration process.

Georgian Dream responded to these criticisms by appealing to traditional values. They marginalized openly pro-Russian and aggressively anti-European conservative forces, likely under their control, by revoking some parties' registrations, which limited their access to resources. Simultaneously, they sought to attract their electorate by amplifying the conservative parties' messages. Despite these maneuvers, the Georgian Dream did not openly reject the European path, adopting the official slogan, "Only with dignity, peace, and prosperity to Europe."

In conclusion, the pre-election period created a reality in which the election administration was fully aligned with the ruling party's interests. The pre-election rallies held shortly before the elections showcased Georgian Dream's ability to mobilize administrative resources. Additionally, the election campaign revealed a significant disparity in

financial resources between the Georgian Dream and the opposition. Even based on official data, the ruling party received more donations than the combined total of all other political parties, which is evident in the scale of their campaign and the abundance of election materials.

Election Violations and Results

On election day, local observation missions documented numerous violations, including the manipulation of ID cards (several cases of confiscating voters' ID cards were reported before the elections), ballot box stuffing, pressure exerted both around polling stations and directly within them, alleged voter bribery, voting in someone else's name, and instances of multiple voting. Several cases of violence against election observers and media representatives were also recorded at polling stations.

The principle of election secrecy, a fundamental constitutional principle, was violated by both local and international observation missions. The local monitoring organization, Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, called for the annulment of results at all 2,263 polling stations where technology was used, arguing that the secrecy of the elections had not been upheld. Multiple reports and

pieces of evidence circulated in the media suggesting that voter choices could be discerned from the other side of the ballot paper and that election procedures failed to ensure the guaranteed confidentiality of voter intentions. Legal proceedings related to election violations, including breaches of voter secrecy, exposed significant issues within the judicial system and revealed its vulnerability to governmental influence.

According to the Central Election Commission, Georgian Dream secured 53.93% of the vote, winning 89 parliamentary seats, while four opposition parties crossed the 5% threshold. However, none of the opposition parties accepted the election results and, as of this writing, have refused to take their seats in Parliament. Meanwhile, the victorious Georgian Dream displayed considerable complacency following the election.

Given the contested nature of the election results, it is challenging to ascertain how accurately they reflect the voters' true preferences, whether between the abstract concept of "war" and the perception of real "peace" or between a tangible, relatively predictable present and an uncertain, hard-to-envision future under a new government.

3. Armenia's pre-election narratives and EU vs Russia dilemma

Gor Madoyan

November 2024

Introduction

Despite two years remaining until the Armenian parliamentary elections, the pre-election promises, political rhetoric, and the potential divisions within future political camps, including their narratives and key figures, are already beginning to take shape. The current administration, led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and the ruling *Civil Contract* party, is actively addressing these developments. Additionally, certain factions within the extra-parliamentary opposition, which maintain a stance of collaboration with the government and can be categorized as the “constructive opposition,” also contribute to this ongoing discourse.

Both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition forces are preparing for the upcoming elections, taking a stance against dialogue with the government and branding its proponents as “traitors.” In response, the ruling authorities have labelled these opposition groups as “formers.” In terms of style, structure, and political discourse, the relationship between the government and the parliamentary opposition exhibits notable par-

allels with that between the Georgian Dream Party and the *United National Movement* in Georgia.

Concurrently, the erosion of alternative viewpoints within the public and political spheres is becoming more pronounced. This trend reinforces a binary, black-and-white narrative restricting public access to diverse discourses and perspectives beyond this dichotomy.

In summary, both the government and the opposition are currently focused on preparing for the upcoming regular elections, with no discourse surrounding resignations or demands for early elections. The prevailing political rhetoric closely mirrors that of 2021, framed within the post-war binary narrative. This narrative posits two opposing sides: the current administration, portrayed as providers of “bread and circuses,” and the former ruling powers, depicted as criminals responsible for the country’s downfall and viewed as a fifth column aligned with Russia, Armenia’s adversary.

Internal politics

The pre-election proposals from the government and its allied opposition forces can be summarized as follows: the state's primary purpose is to ensure universal well-being and socially secure life. This concept is encapsulated in a slogan coined by the prime minister—"The state is a tool for earning bread"—which, though simplistic and bordering on vulgar, underscores the state's social functions by equating them with the provision of livelihoods.

Additionally, the government emphasizes the importance of reclaiming property stolen from the country and its citizens, accelerating the disclosure of corruption cases, and reclaiming the assets of officials implicated in acquiring illegal wealth.

The current administration continues to highlight the potential dangers associated with the return of former authorities, focusing on their record of crime, looting, and corruption. It promises to investigate crimes committed by these past regimes and has initiated a limited number of criminal prosecutions. In this narrative, domestic opposition figures are labelled collaborators with the previous government, allies of Russia, or both.

The former government and Russia have collectively become symbols of a "calamitous and unfortunate past" that must be avoided at all costs. According to this narrative, the current government is positioned as the safeguard against a return to that past, with the outcome of future elections presented as the key to maintaining stability. Thus, the elections are framed as a choice to preserve the present, reject the past, and continue living in a future that celebrates the present. This present is depicted as the cornerstone of a citizen's existence, characterized by numerous festivities and entertainments—a modern parallel to the Roman concept of "bread and circuses." Complementing these strategies is the government's active information policy targeting the domestic audience, supported by a strong presence on social media and in traditional media outlets. This approach can be termed the *Armenian model of audience democracy*, where the prime minister embodies multiple roles: blogger, stand-up performer, lecturer, public speaker, intellectual, architect, builder, activist, and even self-critic. This multifaceted engagement reinforces the prime minister's image as a versatile leader, blurring the lines between statesmanship and popular media personality and fostering a direct, informal connection with the public.

Prime minister's team members are primarily viewed as subordinates lacking political identity. A notable example of this dynamic is the recent statement by the Speaker of the National Assembly of Armenia, who admitted that neither he nor other members hold individual political ratings; instead, it is the collective rating of the team and, most notably, of Prime Minister Pashinyan. This acknowledgment effectively suggests that the parliament and its speaker, under a government claiming to be democratic, function merely as extensions of the government and its leader. The implication is clear: these members act as subordinate executors without independence or personal political capital, reinforcing the perception of a centralized leadership where the prime minister's persona and influence dominate the political landscape.

Foreign policy

The government's political allies have been discussing the prospect of Armenia's future membership in the European Union, fostering expectations of such integration. Central themes include Armenia's European orientation, the pursuit of regional peace, and the somewhat ambiguous "Crossroads of Peace" concept, which emphasizes the establishment of neighbourly relations

with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, as well as the delimitation and demarcation of disputed borders. Amid the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Armenia seeks to mitigate its security vulnerabilities by supporting partners such as the EU, France, India, and others. This strategy aligns with the extension of the EU observers' mandate.

Simultaneously, there is a discussion of signing an agreement with Azerbaijan to establish peace and formal interstate relations. However, it is acknowledged that such an agreement may not resolve the core issues but would serve as a symbolic measure for official Yerevan to justify the continuation of the peace process. While there is mention of positive developments in relations with Türkiye, these discussions have yet to yield significant results.

In the government's rhetoric and the discourse of its affiliates, Russia has been labelled as the primary adversary. Nevertheless, paradoxically, Russia remains Armenia's leading economic partner. Imports from Russia to Armenia and re-exports from Armenia to the United Arab Emirates continue to drive economic growth, reinforcing economic interdependence. This relationship has further entrenched Armenia's

reliance on the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Russian economic frameworks. Official discussions have also highlighted the intention for deeper integration with the EAEU, stronger ties with BRICS, and enhanced trade relations with Iran.

Possible shift and certain uncertainty

When considering Armenia's potential pivot towards the "West," it is crucial to acknowledge Russia's significant role in the Armenian economy and the dependency of Armenia's government and ruling party on this relationship for economic growth. The economic landscape is shaped not only by direct trade and investments but also by the populist strategies the government employs to maintain public approval and manage economic interventions. Despite discussions of European integration and partnerships with Western allies, Armenia's economy remains deeply intertwined with Russian economic structures, including the EAEU. This dependency underscores the complexities of balancing aspirations for Western alignment with the practical realities of economic reliance on Russia. However, Russia remains deeply embedded in Armenia's economy through energy dependence (gas, oil, nuclear energy supplies), Rus-

sian ownership of critical infrastructure, and more of Armenia's export and re-export, deepening addiction from Russia. Another weakness is security challenges, such as Armenia's security situation being complex due to tensions with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Russian military presence in Armenia's Iranian and Turkish borders, military base in Gyumri, and CSTO membership have been pillars of Armenian security. In this sense, possible Western security cooperation would require careful balance. Solid practical steps are already underway: Increased diplomatic engagement with the EU and the US, participation in EU programs and initiatives, growing civil society connections with Western institutions, and democratic reforms that align more with Western values. A possible shift is possible but would likely need to be gradual and carefully managed to build alternative economic partnerships, develop new security arrangements, maintain stability during the transition, and address energy security and socio-cultural "Brexit" with Russia dominating entertaining culture.

4. Does geopolitics help in local elections, or is it a spoiler?

Arsen Kharatyan

November 2024

2024 has been an election year for many of Eastern Partnership and South Caucasus countries. Parliamentary elections were held in Azerbaijan and Georgia, while Moldova voted for its president and amended its constitution, adding EU integration as a constitutional goal. While the outcomes of the elections in Azerbaijan could be easily predicted, as the country is under the tight control of Ilham Aliyev's regime, Azerbaijani civil society members are either in prison or outside of the country; the elections in Moldova and Georgia were not only unpredictable but delivered surprising results for many.

In the case of Moldova, the pro-EU candidate, acting president Maya Sandu, won her second term of the presidency as a result of a second round of the elections. At the same time, the constitutional referendum was voted in with a small margin of 0,5 percent, where Moldova's diaspora played an instrumental role in the vote. In the meantime, there were clear messages that Russia tried to interfere in the elections by using its soft power, propagand machine,

and bribes. Even in this situation, the people of Moldova showed that most of the country is committed to its European future.

In the case of Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party formally won the elections. However, the four other opposition groups did not recognize the results of the elections and chose not to take their mandates and go to the parliament. While the Georgian Dream Party, based on these elections, does not have a constitutional majority, it still has over 50% of the votes, which may allow the party to form a parliament and a government. The country's president Salome Zurbishvili also refused to accept the results of the vote – calling it a Russian election, which was rigged from the people of Georgia. Few countries (5) congratulated the Georgian PM Irakli Kobakhidze.

Whatever internal political crisis may arise soon in the aftermath of these elections remains to be seen. However, most experts would agree that in both Moldova and Georgia, these elections were not about domestic

issues but, by large, about the geopolitical choices of Georgians and Moldovans. In particular, with these votes, the people of Georgia and Moldova were not only choosing politicians and political parties for their domestic programs but also for the future course of their countries with regard to European integration vs. deepening relations with Russia.

This ultimately became the dominant political discourse in Georgia and Moldova during the pre-election period. However, in the case of Moldova, the ruling party was the one to initiate the discussion of geopolitics and advocated for Moldova's further integration with the EU; in the case of Georgia, it was the opposition that elevated the pre-election debates in the context of Georgia's geopolitical choice. The latter was caused by a controversial law adopted by Georgia's parliament in the spring of 2024. The so-called "Foreign agent law" caused massive protests in the streets of Tbilisi. At the same time, the government was accused of copying this law from Russia to limit the activities of Georgia's civil society.

Our interest in this paper is to discuss whether geopolitics in local elections are helpful from the perspective of democracy and further integration of, in this case, aspirant

countries like Georgia and Moldova. We would also like to understand if this process will, by extension, continue in the case of Armenia, which is also showing interest in further integrating with the EU but has a lower status compared to Georgia and Moldova.

One can argue that when you bring geopolitics into the local debate, it allows external players to have a more significant impact on the country's domestic processes. In particular, Russia's role, which can be described as a spoiler for countries with European aspirations, becomes more proactive when the debate is about choosing between Moscow and Brussels. It is well-known that Putin's Russia has an aggressive approach, especially with the countries of the former Soviet Union. Ukraine is currently the most vivid example of Russia's aggressive behavior, which has deepened phobias and fears in other countries of Russia's neighborhood.

The case of Georgia's October 26, 2024, parliamentary elections clearly shows how this geopolitical debate inside Georgia allowed the Russian propaganda machine to work more effectively. The debate between the political groups of Georgia divided the society between

those who support “the war agenda” (pro-Western opposition) and those who advocate stability (pro-Russian Georgian dream ruling party). Other known Russian narratives, such as the EU is against traditional family values, became prominent during the pre-election campaign. Thus, when discussing a country’s geopolitical choice, in this case, Russia vs. West, we often enable fake narratives to dominate the political discourse.

In the case of Moldova, we observe similar tendencies. While over 60% of Moldovans already have Romanian citizenship, EU support to Moldova is of great magnitude both financially and politically; Moldova has a visa-free regime with the EU, signed an Association Agreement and DCFTA, and has a candidate country status. Still, Russian influence continues to be a critical factor in the country. Most experts argue that a small country like Moldova, with a direct border with the EU (Romania), would have the most excellent chance to be the next EU member state. However, the referendum to include EU integration as a constitutional norm in Moldova showed that the country still has a significant portion of its population who consider integration with Russia as a better option for Moldova.

The question is how effective the formal public debate about the integrational choice of former Soviet countries into the EU is. The other question is - can these countries bypass those discussions, or is it inevitable? While Georgia and Moldova are good examples of how this debate can benefit Russia’s further involvement, at least on the level of political discussions, Armenia is heading toward parliamentary elections in 2026, and it may very well be that the primary political debate might be around geopolitics as well. We are already observing processes such as EuroVote in Armenia, where several pro-Western political forces initiated a collection of signatures for EU integration. They not only collected enough signatures (50 thousand) over three weeks but may put this topic as yet another subject for a possible referendum.

Time will show how important this debate will be during the election year in Armenia; however, the EuroVote in Armenia is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, if there are not enough people joining the referendum to vote “Yes to EU”, this will allow “Eurosceptics” to say that the Armenian people are not interested in EU integration and, by extension, argue that the only viable future for the country is to deepen ties with

Russia further, on the other hand, it is not clear if the EU is ready to accept Armenia as a future member state. In other words, if geopolitics is to become a matter of domestic political debate, there should be a clear understanding of the possible impact it may have on the country proper and the external players, who can and will use this debate for their own goals.

Even if the “Russia vs. West” debate does have objective ground in most post-Soviet countries, it is more important to carefully examine how this debate is manipulated to deepen external interests (particularly Russia) inside those states and among their publics. One last question is again about understanding how far the EU is ready to go in its expansion policies. Does the European Union see its future going as far as Caucasus and Central Asia, or is there a final border for the EU?

Last but not least, can it handle conflict-packed countries like Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia in their current situations, or are there pre-conditions and/or renewed terms for this possible future membership, especially considering that the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, the situation in Georgia and Moldova may bring more challenges rather than suggest solutions.

5. Global and Regional Electoral Processes: Accelerators of Changes vs Stabilizers of Instability?

Ivane Abramashvili

November 2024

The key presidential elections in the USA and Donald Trump's re-election as President in November 2024 indicate potentially significant implications for the geopolitical and security dynamics in the South Caucasus.

Historically, Trump's foreign policy emphasized reducing U.S. military and diplomatic commitments in areas perceived as peripheral to core American interests, focusing instead on issues like counter-terrorism, trade negotiations, and great-power competition, particularly with China. While strategically located, the South Caucasus has not traditionally been a high priority for U.S. foreign policy under any administration. However, the region's role in energy transit, proximity to Russia and Iran, and being dragged into the Ukraine and wider Black Sea regional context changes the equation.

Trump's previous presidency demonstrated an ambivalence toward NATO, a cornerstone of European collective security. While his administration provided lethal military aid to Ukraine, a departure from

his predecessor's policies, Trump frequently criticized NATO allies for not meeting defence spending targets and questioned the strategic value of the alliance. This rhetoric raised concerns among European partners about U.S. commitment to mutual defence under Article 5 of the NATO treaty. If these tendencies resurface, they could encourage Russia, which has long sought to exploit divisions within NATO and undermine Western unity.

In the context of Ukraine, Trump's relationship with Russia looms large. Critics have noted his perceived reluctance to confront Moscow directly, coupled with controversial statements that downplay Russian aggression. A renewed Trump administration might pursue more favourable policies towards Moscow, potentially at the expense of Ukrainian interests. This could manifest in reduced military aid, a weaker U.S. stance on sanctions, or diminished diplomatic support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, particularly in ongoing negotiations over the Donbas conflict and Crimea.

The Black Sea region, a critical theatre of competition between NATO and Russia, could similarly experience shifts in U.S. strategy. Under Trump, the focus on great-power competition with China often overshadowed Eastern European security concerns. Continuing this pivot could lead to a relative deprioritization of U.S. naval and military presence in the Black Sea, weakening deterrence against Russian militarization in the area. The lack of a robust U.S. commitment might compel regional actors like Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey to recalibrate their positions, potentially leading to a more fragmented approach to security in the region.

On the other hand, Trump's transactional approach might create opportunities for bilateral deals with regional states, potentially bypassing multilateral frameworks. This could lead to uneven outcomes, with some countries benefiting from enhanced security cooperation while others face reduced support. However, such a strategy risks undermining the cohesion of the collective Western response to Russian aggression.

Despite the narrative about strengthening "sovereignty," Georgia's October 26 parliamentary election was fully contextualized in the larger geo-

political divide between Russia vs. Europe and War vs. Peace. Still, disputed results can have a significant implication for Georgia's foreign policy orientation, its role in the South Caucasus, and its status as a candidate country for the European Union membership. This election marks a pivotal moment in Georgia's geopolitical trajectory, raising concerns over democratic backsliding, a tilt towards Moscow, and stagnation in its EU accession process.

Under GD leadership, Georgia's foreign policy has increasingly reflected a cautious or even accommodating stance toward Russia, despite ongoing tensions stemming from Russia's 2008 invasion and occupation of Georgian territories such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The party has emphasized a narrative of "neutrality" and reconciliation, which some analysts interpret as a shift away from pro-Western ambitions toward policies more aligned with Kremlin interests. This positioning could lead to a deepened role for Russia in the South Caucasus and limit Georgia's ability to serve as a counterbalance to Russian influence in the region.

Regarding the European Union, Georgia's EU accession process has effectively stalled. Despite being granted EU candidate status in 2023, subsequent Georgian Dream's policies—such as the controversial “transparency of foreign influence” law resembling Russian legislation—have drawn sharp criticism from EU officials. This legislation and other actions perceived as undermining democratic principles have strained Georgia's relationship with the EU, making integration efforts increasingly precarious. The EU and the United States have linked further progress on integration and financial aid to demonstrable commitments to democratic reforms, which have yet to materialize under GD leadership.

In the South Caucasus context, the Georgian Dream's re-election will likely affect its bilateral relations with neighbouring countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan. Georgia's strategic role as a transit corridor for energy resources and trade remains critical. Still, a pro-Russian tilt could complicate its ability to mediate or actively engage in regional conflicts. This shift may embolden Russian efforts to consolidate influence across the region while weakening Georgia's ability to assert independence in its foreign policy.

The current crisis over the legitimacy of Georgian Dream's re-election signals a potential continuation of policies that prioritize internal stability and neutrality at the expense of deeper Euro-Atlantic integration. This raises critical questions about Georgia's long-term sovereignty, democratic development, and role as a regional player in the South Caucasus.

If we see current developments in a larger paradigm, then recent global and regional elections serve as the accelerators of change; however not necessarily shed light on the future set up of the potential zones of influence, which can coincide with democratic and authoritarian political regimes. Despite the mantra about local needs first, the elections are becoming increasingly geopolitical globally, and the South Caucasus has become part of it.

6. Georgian-Armenian Bilateral and Multilateral Relations: Value Choice vs. Regional Approach?

David Bragvadze

November 2024

As a result of the parliamentary elections held in Georgia on October 26, 2024, official data announced by the Central Election Commission show that the ruling party won the trust of 54 percent of citizens and will hold 89 mandates in Georgia's 150-member parliament. Four other political parties crossed the 5 percent electoral threshold. It should be noted that the party of former president Mikheil Saakashvili recorded its worst result in history, coming in third place.

The Georgian opposition does not recognize the official results announced by the CEC, and all four election subjects that crossed the threshold have declared that they will not participate in parliamentary work. Three of these political forces have more or less a unified position, while the party of former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia takes a different approach. Although it does not recognize the election results, claims the elections were falsified, and refuses to enter parliament, it distances itself from the other three political entities.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the international community also has low confidence in the election results. Georgian Dream was congratulated only by the leaders of neighboring countries and the Presidents of Venezuela, Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico. In such circumstances, the international legitimacy of the elections remains uncertain. We cannot say that the international community does not recognize the results, nor can we say that it does.

Against this backdrop, the ruling party is exacerbating already severe tensions with Europe. Officials, including the chairman of parliament, have refused to meet with the European delegation that arrived in Georgia, including the chairs of the eight EU countries' foreign and European affairs committees.

The opposition is attempting to stir up a wave of protests. Still, even though a large portion of the population does not trust the election results, the number of demonstrations on the streets is significantly

smaller than during the “Russian law” protests in the spring of this year. In short, despite the rigged elections, there are no revolutionary sentiments among the population.

The elections were neither free nor fair. This is evidenced by both sociological surveys conducted before the elections and reliable exit polls, as well as confirmed cases of voter bribery, intimidation, mass violations of voting secrecy, and many other electoral manipulations.

There are no optimistic expectations that the government will agree to hold new elections. There is also little reason to believe the government has the resources to restore relations with the West. The elections themselves do not inspire confidence, nor does the government show any signs of slowing down its sharply anti-Western rhetoric, which began in February 2022 and became incredibly aggressive in the pre-election period.

Considering all of this, Georgia’s international future remains even more uncertain. Looking at the title of our discussion, one of the key terms is “values.” It can only be said with certainty that if Georgian Dream stays in power for a fourth

term, its policies will have nothing to do with values — this can be ruled out. Another thing that can also be said for sure is that under the Georgian Dream’s government, Georgia’s European perspective will essentially cease to exist, and the country will not be able to seize the historical opportunity that came its way due to a unique coincidence of circumstances.

Russian influence in Georgia will continue to grow, as it has already been visibly increasing. Georgia will drift further away from the West and place greater emphasis on regional cooperation. Likely, the government will again highlight the need to deepen relations with China. This will inevitably contribute to the growth of authoritarian tendencies, which are already evident.

Although the authorities are very pleased with Donald Trump’s victory in the United States, it remains unclear what the future of Georgian-American relations will be. While Trump’s and Bidzina Ivanishvili’s pre-election rhetoric may seem similar, it is still difficult to assert that Trump will be favorable toward a political force that has increasingly aligned itself with China and Iran in recent years.

This, however, does not affect Georgian-Armenian relations. Regardless of the election outcome, it will be recognized by the neighboring countries, including Armenia. We saw that Nikol Pashinyan was among the first to congratulate the Georgian Dream on its “convincing” victory. One thing that can be reasonably assumed is that if the opposition were to win, Georgia would return to its EU integration policy in all its forms, making this one of the new government’s main priorities. This shift would likely have a positive impact on Armenia’s European perspective. However, it will be more difficult for Yerevan to strengthen its ties with Europe.

The assumption that the Georgian Dream government will strengthen authoritarian tendencies would also negatively impact Armenia, as established authoritarian regimes would surround it. In such conditions, the prospect of democratic development would become increasingly uncertain. If authoritarianism becomes the dominant trend in the South Caucasus, Armenia will likely not remain immune to this shift, and we may witness the transformation of Pashinyan, who once came to power with democratic ideals.

Of course, this would be the most undesirable outcome, but in the South Caucasus, especially in recent times, desired scenarios have been few and far between.

Of course, all of the above is an assumption at this point. Many more assumptions could be made, but as long as the situation remains unclear—with Georgia’s political landscape fragile, expectations of growing Russian influence, uncertainty over China’s role in the region, and no clear indication of what policy the Trump administration will adopt in the South Caucasus—it is impossible to make any definitive predictions. In fact, it’s probably not worth attempting.

In addition to the points raised above, there are other expectations regarding Georgia, including the potential expansion of the sanctions regime and the possibility of personal condemnation of Bidzina Ivanishvili. However, it’s currently not feasible to substantiate such claims.

Authoritarianism and populism are not just South Caucasian trends; unfortunately, their rise in global politics is also affecting our region. As long as the war in Ukraine continues — a conflict that Trump promises to end “very soon” but likely will not — the promise of “peace” remains an appealing narrative in societies still reeling from decades of war.

We should remain hopeful that democracy will survive in Georgia and Armenia, although it is difficult to say that with certainty at this point. No one knows whether we will end up with a scenario resembling Belarus or Serbia instead of Georgia. In the most challenging circumstances, the latter might not even be the worst outcome. However, it is also possible that “Georgia” could emerge as a new, previously unknown case of authoritarianism characterized by informal governance and several distinct features. In the future, when analyzing the authoritarian tendencies in another country, an analyst might refer to this “X country” as following the Georgian model of authoritarianism.

Therefore, democracy in the South Caucasus faces a difficult test, which, hopefully, it will overcome, although the current circumstances offer little reason for optimism.

7. The Impact of Developments in Georgia on Armenia's Foreign and Domestic Policy: Towards the EU without Kartlos?

Anna Gevorgyan-Davtyan

November 2024

In 2024, the most discussed topic in Armenia's foreign policy has been diversification. On April 5, a trilateral meeting between Washington, Brussels, and Yerevan was held in Brussels, resulting in a joint declaration. The declaration's key provision emphasized supporting Armenia in diversifying its foreign policy, particularly its energy sector (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations of the European Commission, 2024). The Armenian government also speaks of diversifying Armenia's security sector partnerships (News.am, 2024). Meanwhile, the Armenian opposition interprets the increasingly frequent mutual visits and growing cooperation between Armenia and Western countries as a "reversal of geopolitical alignment." Similar views are echoed by Moscow, often accompanied by threats based on this premise. However, the government's assertions about the need to build closer ties with the West frequently waver, influenced by domestic political and geopolitical developments.

Earlier this year, while discussing the strategic partnership declaration signed with Georgia and the importance of Georgia obtaining EU candidate status, Pashinyan emphasized: "Now, two of our neighbouring countries have EU candidate status. Whereas before one might say, 'What does the EU have to do with our region?', now the EU, in essence, is part of our region, and we must engage with this reality." (First Channel News, 2024)

Even before Georgia obtained EU candidate status, Armenia's authorities consistently advocated for this decision during meetings with their European partners and in public speeches. This effort was also acknowledged by Georgia's ambassador to Armenia, Giorgi Sharvashidze (Chedia, 2024). At the same time, the close cooperation between the Armenian and Georgian governments has been included. It continues to include shared positions on not joining economic sanctions against Russia and increasing trade between the two countries. After the elections in

Georgia, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev were among the first to congratulate Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze on his "impressive victory." (Primeminister.am, 2024)

During Georgia's parliamentary elections, representatives from Armenia's civic and political spheres also participated as observers. According to the report by the "Independent Observer" group of NGOs, Armenian civil society representatives documented several election violations, including the "carousel" voting fraud technique, issues related to the transparency of ballots, and other factors (Hcav.am, 2024).

In contrast, Armenian opposition politicians who observed the elections painted a much more positive picture in their interviews but did not issue a joint statement. Like Georgia's government, they generally presented the Georgian people's choice as pragmatic, avoiding geopolitical games and reflecting a sober decision.

The elections in Georgia, however, are expected to influence Armenia's domestic and foreign policy in several areas. Suppose Georgia's newly re-elected government continues its confrontational stance with EU and

U.S. officials, leaving its EU candidacy frozen and failing to revisit the controversial "foreign agents" law adopted before the elections. In that case, Armenia's foreign policy diversification will face significant risks. While some argue that EU-Armenia relations can develop independently of the crisis in EU-Georgia relations, many believe the EU views the region as an interconnected whole.

If EU-Azerbaijan relations remain confined to energy cooperation, EU-Georgia and EU-Armenia relations encompass significant democratic reform packages. For Georgia, these are tied to the "homework" stemming from its EU candidate status. For Armenia, they are part of the "Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement" (CEPA) signed in 2017 and fully ratified in 2021.

At the same time, a freeze in EU-Georgia relations could increase Russia's influence on Georgia's economy and possibly its political sphere, which would inevitably affect Russia's policies toward Armenia. In other words, a return of Georgia to Russia's political orbit could close the window for Armenia's foreign policy diversification and pull Armenia further into Russia's sphere of political influence.

The content of Georgia’s pre-election rhetoric was also widely discussed in Armenia’s public and political domains and is expected to influence Armenian political discourse as well. Armenian reactions to the “war or peace” dichotomy used by Georgia’s “Georgian Dream” party varied. While this narrative already exists in Armenian political rhetoric, the approach used in Georgia’s elections will likely shape the discourse for future Armenian elections.

Since 2020, the ruling party has frequently labelled Armenian opposition movements as “war-driven.” However, unlike in the Georgian context, these movements in Armenia are often described as pro-Russian and instigators of war under Moscow’s directives. Meanwhile, a new pro-European integration camp is forming in Armenia, advocating for faster EU accession. This camp recently concluded a petition demanding a referendum on joining the EU, and the matter will be discussed in the National Assembly.

The government’s stance is that while EU integration is a critical goal for Armenia, a referendum on joining the EU is premature and risky. Considering recent public opinion polls in Armenia, which show that over 50% of respondents favour EU

membership (IRI, 2024)—primarily citing security as their reason—it is likely that the themes of security, war, and peace will continue to be leveraged and politicized by both pro-EU forces and other factions.

This suggests that during the upcoming regular or possible snap parliamentary elections in 2026, Armenia’s ruling party will defend its “Era of Peace” vision while combating accusations of being war-driven—whether those accusations come from pro-Russian forces or those exploiting the issue of EU accession.

The perception and evaluation of the elections themselves could also be influenced by the Georgian government’s legitimization of practices like using voter lists, accompanying voters to polling stations, and employing administrative resources. These practices have long characterized Armenian electoral processes, and any return to these traditions could now find additional justification: namely, that elections in Armenia are at least better than or comparable to those in neighbouring countries.

Western reactions to Georgia’s pre-election and election periods also became a topic of discussion in Armenia’s public and political arenas. The sanctions imposed

on Bidzina Ivanishvili and the critical stance toward Georgia's election results were frequently mentioned, contrasted with the lack of any sanctions against Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev. Despite Aliyev's actions—including initiating the 2020 war (EVN Report, 2020), committing war crimes, blockading Nagorno-Karabakh in 2022 (Amnesty International, 2023), starving its population, and conducting ethnic cleansing (Freedom House, 2024) in 2023—he faced no repercussions. These comparisons were discussed within the context of the West's "double standards," interest-driven decisions, and deviation from value-based politics.

Anti-Armenian sentiments during Georgia's pre-election period also became a subject of separate discussion. As in almost every election, this time, too, there were instances where Georgian politicians attempted to hide their Armenian roots (Kincha, 2024). This sensitive topic was further inflamed by Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili, who, in an interview, referred to an election fraud mechanism as the "Armenian carousel" (Interpressnews.ge, 2024) and, days later, posted on her personal Facebook page a tourism ad promoting a trip to "Historical Georgia, Lori." (Zourabichvili, 2024)

Although the term "Armenian carousel" is not new in the Georgian context and was not invented by the President, its use by such a high-ranking official sparked outrage in Armenia. The President's reference to Lori as part of historical Georgia drew even harsher criticism. While some speculated that her Facebook page might be fake, the Georgian Presidential Administration confirmed to an Armenian media outlet that the page does indeed belong to Salome Zourabichvili (Harutyunyan, 2024).

This wave of protests was followed by a response from Georgia's ambassador to Armenia, Giorgi Sharvashidze, who condemned the President's actions (Mamyran, 2024).

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8. The Church in Pre-Election and Post-Election Processes: Religion and Institutional Power

Anna Sargsyan

November 2024

What is the Armenian Apostolic Church, and what is the purpose of church-state relations? At first glance, this question seems simple, but it is far from straightforward. This topic has rarely been subjected to sociological and political scrutiny. The lack of examination has naturally led to an excess of manipulation. The relationships between church, state, and society often shrink from being part of broader processes of direction-setting and identity-building and instead become confined within the dynamics of election campaigns and political competition. Why?

The Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) is the only Armenian institution that has preserved its continuity and legitimacy for more than 1,700 years. It has played a stabilizing role in social cohesion throughout various historical and civilization-al stages, creating and managing the framework of national thought. When we consider the fact that it is virtually the sole religious denomination of the Armenian people and recall that the Christian faith of the

Armenian Church has influenced almost all expressions of Armenian self-awareness and culture, it becomes clear that there is no more complex and multifaceted subject of study in Armenian reality than the Church's spiritual and institutional authority. If power is considered a resource, then the Armenian Church was the greatest capital the Armenian people carried into the 21st century.

After Armenia gained independence in 1991, the Armenian Apostolic Church became a symbol of national revival, driven by an emotional response to shedding the burden of Soviet atheism. At the same time, legal frameworks began to form around church-state relations.

The Constitution of the Republic of Armenia established that the Armenian Church is not an ordinary religious or public organization. The Republic of Armenia recognizes "the exclusive mission of the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church as the national church in the spiritual life of the Armenian people, the development

of its national culture, and the preservation of its national identity.” The 2007 Law on Relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church also granted the Church certain privileges.

Interestingly, the Armenian Church itself has not officially demanded broader legal privileges. However, political forces periodically address this topic, with some advocating for expanding privileges and others for limiting them. These relations are often viewed as a resource for political campaigns. From this perspective, such relations are not fundamentally for the benefit of either the state or the Church.

The Church is perceived as a monolithic structure. In this context, faith, clergy, and the AAC institution have merged to such an extent that they have taken on an irrational form. One of the best indicators is the socio-political movement that began in Armenia in May 2024.

The “Sacred Movement” was led by a suspended archbishop. The movement emerged after the Armenian government initiated border demarcation processes with Azerbaijan in the Tavush region. The AAC officially opposed this process, emphasizing its illegality and labeling the return of

certain Armenian territories to Azerbaijan as a one-sided concession. The Primate of the Tavush Diocese, Archbishop Bagrat, joined dissatisfied groups in Yerevan, transforming the movement into political opposition during a live broadcast. The demand shifted to calling for the resignation of the current Prime Minister, proposing a new candidate for Prime Minister—namely, the archbishop himself. The AAC suspended the archbishop’s ecclesiastical (administrative) duties and officially stated that the initiative for regime change was not its own. While some in society (including the ruling political force) did not believe this claim, others believed it but became disillusioned with the Church.

This scenario highlights a new layer of analysis: what expectations does the public have of the Church? It appears some are even willing to delegate the formation of political power to it. However, the AAC’s statement signified that it was unprepared to take away citizens’ civic rights. Yet, it stands ready to protect national rights at both public and international levels within the scope of its institutional capacities.

It is hard to imagine that an institution that has proven its vitality over 17 centuries—one that is a full-fledged

member of the family of Christian churches and international religious and public organizations—could refrain from voicing or defending public and universal concerns. This remains true regardless of political leaders' stances or proposed solutions on such matters.

How could the Church remain silent when Armenians in Artsakh are subjected to ethnic cleansing, when their right to self-determination is grossly violated, or when Azerbaijan's expansionist ambitions threaten Armenia's viability? Portraying the influence of a religious institution in public life as a resurgence of the Inquisition is another form of manipulation.

The AAC is a global Armenian network operating across all continents. The Armenian Diaspora community, which considers the Armenian Church, language, and state symbols of national identity, makes significant economic and social investments in Armenia and has its own vision of Armenia's political future.

However, no political party's program has yet embraced the idea that the AAC, with its vertical and horizontal connections, could serve as a platform for social-political dia-

logue. It could also be a platform for geopolitical dialogue in establishing Armenia's political identity or a venue for civilizational dialogue concerning the security and preservation of the Armenian identity across space and time.

The modern global order is built on institutions and networks governed by democratic or authoritarian rules. Armenia has chosen democratic rules. However, its geopolitical environment includes countries operating under authoritarian rules. Due to historical circumstances, only some states have managed to possess their networked institution.

If a mechanism is created to align this sovereign networked institution with global networks, it would represent the best model of church-state relations that the Armenian people could establish in the age of global governance. Simultaneously, it could address the identity crisis brought about by postmodernity. For now, this challenge remains unanswered.

9. Faith, Power, and Identity: The Role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Electoral Politics

Nino Kobakhidze

November 2024

Introduction

Religious organizations, as civil actors with high social capital, often play significant roles in shaping the social and political landscape in the country. In Georgia, the Georgian Orthodox Christian Church exemplifies this influence. With high authority, autonomy, and a remarkable ability to mobilize people, it is one of the most influential institutions in Georgian society. The Georgian Orthodox Church, an autocephalous body within Eastern Orthodoxy, remains in full communion with other Orthodox churches, including the Russian Orthodox Church. As Georgia's dominant religious institution, its confessors amount to 83.4% of the population, with Muslims making up the second largest religious community at 10.7%.

Religion, in general, has always maintained close ties to politics, and in Georgia, the Orthodox Christian Church has been integral to shaping national identity. Its influence on the Georgian population dates back centuries, and since Georgia gained independence, the Church has newly

emerged to be a powerful force, not only in society but also in the realm of policymaking and government decision-making. This influence is evident in public opinion; for example, a 2023 IRI survey (IRI, 2023) revealed that 91% of Georgians view Patriarch Ilia II favourably, making him one of the country's most respected figures. Among institutions, the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate either tops the list with around 80% or is a runner-up after the Georgian army.

Both society and the state recognize the Church's special position, and the Georgian Constitution acknowledges the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church's unique historical role and its independence from government control (Constitution of the Republic of Georgia, 2020). While Orthodoxy does not hold official status as the state religion, a concordat (Parliament of Georgia, 2002) formalizes the relationship between Church and state, affirming the Orthodox Church's special standing.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has significant influence and actively seeks to intervene in various national processes. Furthermore, the Church has repeatedly attempted to influence state legislation and politics directly.

The Paper examines the relationship between political actors and the Georgian Orthodox Church, focusing on its interactions with various political powers and its influence on political developments, including elections.

The Georgian Orthodox Church and the Rise of Ethnic Nationalism in Georgia

The rise of ethnic nationalism in Georgia in the late 1980s coincided with rebuilding the influence and reputation of the Georgian Orthodox Church, particularly the Patriarchate of Georgia. As the National Movement gained momentum, together with nationalist and state symbols, protest movements began employing religious imagery, such as icons and crosses. While the Church did not actively lead this nationalist surge, it responded by adapting to the shifting political and social landscape.

With the revival of the national movement, religious identity was interlinked

with national identity, and the Church started to be involved in political and social turmoil. However, its role is controversially understood. For instance, when on April 9, 1989, as thousands of Georgians gathered to protest against Soviet rule, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II attempted to prevent bloodshed by urging the crowd to enter the nearby temple to pray. The protesters, however, stood their ground, disregarding the Patriarch. In retrospect, many see this as a missed opportunity to avert the tragedy that ensued, as Soviet forces soon launched a violent crackdown, leaving a lasting impact on Georgian society and politics. Some believe this tragic day set a precedent for the complex and often unconventional political climate that persists in Georgia today. Despite the mixed response to his leadership, the Patriarch's authority continued to grow alongside the National Movement. Political actors, from the National Movement of the late 1980s to recent parties, have frequently sought to engage the Church in politics to leverage its influence. Although the Church traditionally maintains a clear separation from secular government, history reveals how it has shaped political processes. This dynamic—between religious influence and institutionalized political power—frames the Church's complex role within Georgia's electoral and governance landscape.

Recognizing the Church's growing influence, various political figures have sought its endorsement or alignment. For example, Gia Chanturia, leader of the National Democratic Party (NDP), proposed a "theo-democracy," suggesting that a synod should form the upper chamber of parliament, directly integrating religious authority into the government. This proposal underscored the extent to which politicians hoped to ally with the Church, viewing its endorsement as a means to gain legitimacy and public support.

The relationship between the Georgian Orthodox Church and prominent leaders of the National Movement has often been tense. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in particular, had a complicated and adversarial relationship with the Church. In the late 1970s, he accused the Patriarchate of Georgia of possible ties with the KGB, even claiming that Ilia II was shielding criminals within the Church. Gamsakhurdia's mistrust of the Church deepened, and in a letter written in exile in 1992, he stated, "Patriarch Ilia directed his relationship with me on the instructions of the 'State Security Service.' He never accepted me and tried in every way to expel me from the Sioni congregation, as I exposed State Security

Service's activities in the Church and his collaborationism." (Gamsakhurdia, 1992)

Despite these tensions, the Patriarch appeared loyal to the national government during the first free elections in 1990, when he blessed the first session of parliament. This moment marked the restoration of Christian holidays and the cancellation of communist celebrations. These events were deeply significant to the Georgian people. While complicated, the relationship between the Church and the new government became more regulated. As Gamsakhurdia stated in 1991 at the Supreme Council: "The spiritual nature of the apostolic activity of the Church excludes its direct participation in the political system of the country, but the separation of the Church from the political system should not mean the separation of the state and the Church."

Less than a year after Georgia's first democratic elections, the confrontation between the National Congress and the "Round Table" intensified, leading to the Tbilisi War of December-January 1991-92. This conflict resulted in the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia's government, and the military council seized power, suspending

the Constitution and dissolving the Supreme Council. During this turmoil, the Patriarch called on all sides to find common ground. However, he remained neutral, never directly intervening to mediate or defend the legitimate government. Critics, particularly supporters of Gamsakhurdia, accused him of failing to act decisively to preserve peace and stability. It is also well known that Ilia II had close ties with Jaba Ioseliani, the leader of the “Mkhedrioni,” an armed group that played a key role in overthrowing Gamsakhurdia. This connection further complicated the Patriarch’s role in Georgia’s political developments.

This complex relationship between political actors and the Georgian Orthodox Church laid the foundation for the intricate interplay between religion and politics that continues to shape Georgian national identity and political life today.

Shevardnadze and the Church: Political Alliance and Religious Influence

During Eduard Shevardnadze’s presidency (1992–2003), the Georgian Orthodox Church gained substantial influence in Georgian society and politics. Shevardnadze, a former Soviet Foreign Minister, returned to Georgia at a time when the country was grappling with civil unrest, eco-

nomic collapse, and the aftermath of Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s presidency. Seeking stability and legitimacy, Shevardnadze recognized the Church’s social authority and gradually integrated it into the nation’s political landscape.

The Patriarch and Eduard Shevardnadze are known to have shared a special relationship. Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II became his godfather, acknowledging Shevardnadze’s conversion and justifying that he was not a member of the Church before. This act symbolized a spiritual bond and helped legitimize Shevardnadze’s leadership, reinforcing his connection to the Church and bolstering his public image in post-Soviet Georgia. Moreover, in 1993, when Shevardnadze contemplated resigning from his post, the situation quickly changed. Hours later, the Georgian lawmakers voted to reject his resignation, and thousands of Georgians gathered in support of him. During this critical moment, the Patriarch visited Shevardnadze and offered his blessing, telling him that, in such a difficult time for the country, he had no right to resign, and as a “spiritual father of the country,” he gave the blessing to continue exercising his authority. This act of support provided Shevardnadze with added legitimacy and publicly

endorsed his leadership during a difficult period.

In 1995, a new Georgian constitution recognized the Georgian Orthodox Church's unique role in national history. This acknowledgment was not merely symbolic; it provided the Church with significant cultural and social authority, though not establishing it as the state religion. The 2002 Concordat between the Georgian state and the Church went a step further, formalizing this relationship. This agreement granted the Church certain privileges, such as tax exemptions, special rights over educational and cultural institutions, and state funding—privileges no other religious organization received.

Although there were instances of opposition between the Church and the authorities, two key events stand out. The first was in 1999 when the Church opposed the visit of Pope John Paul II to Georgia, marking the first visit by a Roman Catholic pope. Because of Shevardnadze's firm stance in support of the visit, the Church ultimately had to compromise. Another point of contention arose when Shevardnadze publicly declared Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. In response, the Patriarch issued statements warning against

the influence of Western sects and advocating for Georgia to declare "neutrality" in its foreign policy. The Church occasionally expressed subtle discontent with Shevardnadze's Western-leaning policies, especially regarding closer ties with the United States and NATO, reflecting its own concerns about preserving Georgian traditions and values against perceived foreign influences.

Socially, Shevardnadze's alliance with the Church helped revive Orthodoxy as a pillar of Georgian identity. This period saw the number of parishioners grow significantly and a surge in church-building projects across the country, and the Church itself flourished, strengthening its influence in Georgian society.

Despite Shevardnadze's initial success in using the Church to bolster his regime's legitimacy, by the early 2000s, public dissatisfaction with his government's corruption and economic stagnation had overshadowed this. The Church's influence persisted, but Shevardnadze's reliance on its authority was no longer sufficient to maintain his power. Eventually, after the 2003 Rose Revolution, Shevardnadze resigned, starting a new era of Western-leaning reforms under Mikheil Saakashvili, setting the stage

for a complex new relationship between the Church and the state in Georgia.

The United National Movement and the Georgian Orthodox Church: New Era

Saakashvili's government was not closely aligned with the Church from the beginning. Before coming to power, the dominant political discourse focused on the protection of minorities, particularly religious minorities. The "Kmara" organization, a key activist group and youth political movement in Georgia, played a significant role in this context. "Kmara" campaigned against Eduard Shevardnadze and was instrumental in the Rose Revolution of 2003. Notably, "Kmara" defended the rights of religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, and opposed the Patriarchate, which had labelled them as sectarians and, at times, individual priests even encouraged physical violence against them.

The liberal rhetoric of Saakashvili's party, the United National Movement (UNM), continued even after coming to power. It prioritized minority rights—ethnic, religious, and sexual—and conflicted with the values and rhetoric of the Church. As a result, the relationship between the

government and the Church was tense, though it remained largely unspoken and separate.

In 2007, following widespread protests against the UNM, culminating on November 7 with violent clashes where police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowds, the ruling party's approval ratings sharply dropped. In response, Saakashvili's government sought the Church's support and endorsement. From that point, financial backing for the Church increased significantly, with 47.6 million GEL allocated in 2010 and 2011, as well as financial support for various Patriarchate eparchies and institutions and high-end vehicles (Netgazeti, 2012). In return, it appears the government hoped for political backing, particularly during elections and in times of crisis.

The 2012 elections were one of the most tense and significant in Georgia's post-Soviet history—the United National Movement (UNM) faced a strong challenge from the Georgian Dream, a coalition led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Georgian billionaire who made a fortune in Russia. The Georgian Dream brought together a broad opposition alliance, encompassing various political parties and factions, united under the leader-

ship of the Ivanishvili. This coalition, which included former government figures, parties of different ideologies, and other opposition groups, presented a formidable challenge to the ruling UNM. The alliance's message resonated with Georgian society, promising change and stability after years of UNM governance. Ivanishvili's campaign emphasized issues such as social justice, economic reform, and a more balanced foreign policy, positioning the Georgian Dream as a political alternative to the UNM's liberal and pro-Western rhetoric.

However, despite the efforts of the UNM since 2007 to gain Church favour through various means, including the attempt to bribe, the Patriarchate did not support the UNM. The most likely reason is that they have never been natural allies: despite their shortcomings, the UNM maintained a liberal discourse focused on minority protection, which was opposite to the Church's rhetoric. Moreover, the Church, though not openly, accused the Saakashvili government of inciting internal divisions within the Patriarchate and attempting to destabilize it. Although, the Patriarchate knew they could not be sure what to expect if UNM won the elections, the example of the developments of 2011 illustrates this. In 2011, the Georgian

Parliament approved a law granting the status of a legal entity under public law to religious organizations operating in Georgia. The Georgian Orthodox Church and opposition parties strongly opposed the law's adoption, viewing it as an overreach by the government into religious affairs. The UNM representatives tried to negotiate, and the Chairman of the Legal Committee even had several meetings organized in the Patriarchate, although the consensus was not reached. In response, the Church organized demonstrations, calling on the government to halt the adoption process. The Patriarchate urged that the law be subject to broader public discussion, proposing that the government seek a consensus among the public and consider international best practices before proceeding. They even offered a compromise solution to address the concerns of various religious groups. Despite these appeals, the United National Movement (UNM) government chose to ignore the Church's objections and, on July 5, 2011, passed the law in an accelerated manner. The Church responded by stating, "The already adopted law is against the interests of both the church and the country. We think that this law will produce its negative results in the near future, for which the government is responsible." (Radiotavisupleba, 2011) This

move signalled that the UNM was unwilling to compromise on key issues despite strong opposition from one of Georgia's most influential institutions. It also raised concerns that, if the UNM were to win the 2012 elections, it might adopt a more authoritarian approach, further side-lining opposition voices and institutions like the Church. This episode highlighted the growing tensions between the Church and the government and the broader political polarization that characterized Georgia's political landscape at the time.

The Patriarchate, unsure of what to expect, refrained from taking a public position. While the Church did not explicitly endorse or oppose the UNM, individual priests, in their sermons, urged people not to vote for the UNM and even publicly cursed Saakashvili and his allies. In response, the Holy Synod issued a statement on July 5, 2012, declaring, "The Church has always been the unifying force of the country, and Georgia especially needs this function today. The Church is universal, and its members hold a variety of political opinions." (Tabula, 2012)

The United National Movement lost the 2012 elections, and while it cannot be said that the Church's position was decisive in the outcome, at-

tempts at influence and interference were clearly evident. The Georgian Dream, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, emerged victorious in these elections. Despite the Church's more neutral stance, its involvement in political affairs during this period highlighted its growing role in shaping the political landscape, even if it did not directly sway the election results. The influence of the Church became a more visible and important factor in the broader context of Georgian politics.

Georgian Dream and the Church: Allies or Adversaries?

Since coming to power in 2012, the Georgian Dream, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, has had a complex and often contentious relationship with the Georgian Orthodox Church. While initially, there were tensions and disagreements, particularly over issues like the controversial anti-discrimination law in 2013, the relationship evolved over time.

In 2013, the Georgian Dream government faced significant opposition from the Church regarding the proposed anti-discrimination law, which included provisions to protect sexual minorities. The Church strongly opposed the law, arguing it would undermine traditional Georgian values. According to the Pa-

triarch's assessment, "Introducing the non-existent concepts of 'sexual orientation' and 'gender identity' into this draft law stirs significant public concern. This is because the personal rights of our citizens are already equally protected under the current legislation in Georgia." (Civil Georgia, 2014) Adopting anti-discrimination legislation was one of Georgia's commitments under the visa liberalization action plan to secure a visa-free regime with the European Union.

It is important, that the Georgian Dream was not a progressive force driven by a commitment to defend liberal values. Instead, its actions were largely shaped by its relationship with the European Union, particularly regarding the requirements for visa liberalization. The party's lack of strong defence for liberal values and minority rights became evident on May 17, 2013, when violent clashes between pro- and anti-LGBT activists in Tbilisi followed a large protest organized by the Church against the anti-discrimination law. The anti-LGBT force mobilized and backed up by the Church. The clashes were severe, with the LGBT activists being forced to flee from the area, some of them injured. The incident and the subsequent response highlighted the state's reluctance to

oppose the Church and defend minority rights or liberal values. The authorities failed to investigate the perpetrators of the violence, and there were no strong statements from the government supporting the protection of rights, further demonstrating the state's failure to uphold the principles of equality and protection for all citizens.

Later, the Patriarchate declared May 17 as "Family Purity Day," effectively hijacking the date and reframing it as a celebration of traditional family values.

Despite the early tensions, there were growing rumours that during his tenure as prime minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili sought to destabilize the Church, allegedly to weaken its influence. Church approval ratings were decreased most during the Georgian Dream rule. However, the government's financial support to the Church increased significantly during this period, reaching 25 million GEL per year.

Ivanishvili, who had a complicated personal relationship with the Church, reportedly did not fully trust the Patriarchate. During a meeting between the Patriarch and Saakashvili, Ivanishvili allegedly remarked, "Go, accompany him, I know you

love him more,” referring to his perception of the Patriarch’s closeness to his political rival. There were even rumours that Ivanishvili was jealous of the Patriarch’s popularity and his top spot in favourability ratings among Georgians.

However, unlike the United National Movement (UNM), which had often been at odds with the Church, the Georgian Dream eventually turned out to be a natural ally of the Patriarchate. As the liberal forces within the Georgian Dream began to lose influence and exit the coalition, nationalistic and conservative factions gained power. These groups, which focused on promoting “family values” and traditional Georgian identity, found common ground with the Church. The Church, in turn, aligned itself more closely with the government’s agenda, particularly in the context of safeguarding conservative social values and resisting liberal, Western-oriented reforms. The collaboration between the Church and the Georgian Dream grew stronger as both entities shared a similar vision, especially regarding family values, national identity, and opposition to liberal policies.

This shift in alignment marked a significant change in Georgia’s political and religious landscape, with Geor-

gian Dream embracing the Church as a key ally in its governance, signalling a more conservative direction for the country.

In the elections since 2012, it was clear that the Georgian Dream did not appear to need backing from the Patriarchate. Instead, the connection between the two seemed more natural, shaped by the public perception that the Georgian Dream defended Christian values and showed respect for the Church without openly attacking the Patriarchate. Therefore, it cannot be said that the Church played a decisive or bold role in the elections or campaigns. The relationship was more about mutual respect and alignment on key values rather than active political intervention.

The 2024 elections became a crucial and intense moment, especially following the Georgian Dream government’s adoption of the “Foreign Influence” law, which sparked massive rallies and a tense political climate. Tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, took to the streets, signalling that the Georgian Dream was in a difficult position. In response, the government began mobilizing its resources. Amid these spring protests, the Patriarchate announced the celebration of “Fam-

ily Purity Day” on May 17, an event that was supported by the Georgian Dream. This move fuelled the perception that popular support was behind the government.

Before the elections, on June 27, 2024, Parliament voted in favour of the “Law on Family Values and the Protection of Minors” in its first reading, a law that received the Patriarchate’s endorsement. The law was preceded by public discussion in the regions of Georgia, where the banning of LGBT propaganda was discussed.

After the first hearing of the Law, the Chairman of Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, remarked, “The Parliament of Georgia made a truly important decision. On May 17, a people’s referendum was held across the country, with one million citizens of Georgia taking to the streets to express their support for this package and demanding that Parliament translate their vote into law.” (Parliament.ge, 2024) This illustrates the close coordination between the government and the Patriarchate, highlighting their strategic alignment and shaping public perception in the lead-up to the elections.

On October 22, the Patriarchate of Georgia issued a statement ahead

of the upcoming elections, asserting that it would not take a political position but would “unequivocally support the choice that will bring long-term peace to Georgia and the strengthening of values in society that will help fortify Christian and family traditions.” This statement followed the government’s decision to transfer land plots in several villages to the Church (Civil Georgia, 2024).

The Patriarchate’s message highlighted the key issues that the Georgian Dream used in its election campaign and have been on the agenda of the months before the elections: protection of national and religious values and the country’s unity, sovereignty, and peace. While emphasizing that the Church could not act as a political party, the statement made it clear that the Patriarchate would support a choice that would promote peace and strengthen Christian and family values, i.e., the Georgian Dream. The Church also appealed to the clergy to maintain unity and peace during the election period, urging them to be mindful of their special role in keeping the public calm amid the heightened emotions of the campaign.

A few days before this announcement, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze signed a decree transferring land

to the Georgian Orthodox Church, including plots in various locations, for symbolic prices of 1 GEL (Government of Georgia Decree N1496, 2024). The government also granted the Church a significant property in Lanchkhuti city for 99 years, free of charge (Government of Georgia Decree N1496, 2024).

This marked a significant moment in the election campaign, as it was the first time the Patriarchate explicitly indicated which side it favoured. The entire Georgian Dream campaign had been centred on the fear of war, with constant references to the word “peace” and warnings that if the opposition came to power, a new war would break out immediately. The Patriarchate’s statement effectively resonated with this narrative, framing the choice for the public as one between peace and instability, thus implicitly encouraging voters to support the Georgian Dream.

In this way, the Patriarchate’s message and the government’s campaign were closely aligned, reinforcing the fear-driven rhetoric that portrayed the Georgian Dream as the guarantor of peace and stability while subtly guiding voters toward supporting the ruling party.

After the elections, when Georgian Dream declared victory, the result was strongly contested by the opposition, with numerous reports of intimidation, bribery, and forgery surfacing. The international community did not recognize the outcome, further fuelling the tensions. Despite this, some officials from the Patriarchate called on the opposition to cease their protests.

Archbishop Iakob, one of the most influential figures within the Church, publicly addressed the situation, saying: “I address the president and the ladies from the opposition: What will these actions give us? The people who won the elections are not complacent—we will not confuse you anymore. The Church always stands where the Georgian nation is.” (Interpressnews, 2024) The Patriarchate has not yet officially congratulated the victors, as the Central Election Commission has not formally declared the results or issued the summary report. However, the general perceptions and the statements imply their approval of the results.

This statement and the subsequent actions made it clear that the Patriarchate was aligning itself with the Georgian Dream. As is often the case, the Church’s stance appeared

to favour the ruling party, reflecting its historical tendency to support those in power. The Church seems to continue to offer its support in various ways, recognizing that the rise of liberal powers could threaten its authority and influence. More liberal or progressive political forces mean the Church has been wary, as these governments will seek to challenge or limit its social and political influence. The Patriarchate is keenly aware that liberal parties, particularly those aligned with Western values, might push for reforms that undermine the Church's traditional role in Georgian society, including advocating for more secular governance and policies that promote minority rights, which could conflict with the Church's conservative stance.

Given this, the Church is likely to remain aligned with political forces that are more sympathetic to its values, such as promoting traditional family structures, national identity, and Christian Orthodoxy. This strategic alignment protects the Church's status and ensures its continued influence in shaping national policy and societal norms. However, as experience shows, at the same time, the Church will wait and not rush into making declarations, preferring to wait for a clear victor before taking sides.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the political landscape of Georgia has evolved significantly over the past few decades. From the rise of ethnic nationalism in the late 1980s to its influential role in the governance of Georgia, particularly in times of political transition, the Church has been a robust and influential institution in shaping the country's national identity and political direction. Its influence on public opinion and political developments is undeniable, as evidenced by its interactions with various political powers, including the National Movement, Shevardnadze's government, the United National Movement, and more recently, the Georgian Dream.

The Patriarchate's involvement in political affairs has not always been straightforward. While it has historically tended to align with those in power, it has also exhibited caution in openly supporting political parties, instead maintaining a strategic stance that favours those in positions of authority, particularly when the public perception aligns with its religious and national values. This was particularly evident during the 2012 elections, when the Church, while refraining from overt political intervention, subtly aligned itself

with the Georgian Dream, reinforcing their shared values of peace, national unity, and Christian traditions.

Over time, the Georgian Dream's approach has been shaped, together with other factors, also by the Church's influence. While the Georgian Dream has not positioned itself as a progressive force, it has managed to capitalize on the Church's support, particularly on family values and national identity issues. The alignment between the Church and the Georgian Dream was further solidified during the 2024 election cycle, where the Church's implicit endorsement helped strengthen the ruling party's campaign, particularly in its portrayal of peace and stability as key to Georgia's future.

Despite the growing connection between the Church and the Georgian Dream, the relationship has not been without tensions, especially concerning liberal policies like anti-discrimination laws. However, the Church's influence remains an important factor in Georgia's political landscape, where it continues to act as a stabilizing force, guiding public opinion and shaping political outcomes. Its evolving role, however, underscores the complexities of the Church's influence in modern Georgian politics, where its support can

be important yet always tempered by its careful navigation of the balance between religious authority and political power.

In conclusion, the Georgian Orthodox Church will continue to play a crucial role in shaping Georgia's political and social future. Its ability to influence public and its strategic alliances with political powers will ensure that it remains a key player in the country's governance.

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Dr Natalya Martirosyan is a peace activist and human rights specialist with over 20 years of experience. Her specialization includes the theory and practice of conflict transformation, Track II Diplomacy, regional cooperation, community development, and gender, research, training, and communications. Dr Martirosyan is a Chairperson for the Armenian Committee of Helsinki Citizens' Assembly NGO. Before moving to the non-governmental sector, she worked at the Ministry of Nature Protection of the Republic of Armenia in the capacity of Deputy Head of the Department of Science, Education, and Information. Among her other assignments, she was a National Expert in drafting the Aarhus Convention. With her chemical physics background, Dr Martirosyan worked as a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Chemical Physics of the National Academy of Science. She is the author of several articles, studies, evaluations, and educational Manuals on Conflict Management and Peace Activism, Gender and Community Development, as well as dozens of scientific works in Chemical Physics.

Nino Kalandarishvili

Nino Kalandarishvili is Chair of the Board of the Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts. She participates in and organizes various civil dialogue processes between Georgians, Abkhaz, and South Ossetians. She is a co-author of Policy documents, views, and analytical documents on conflict-related issues, Peacebuilding, and reconciliation. One direction of her work is working with youth – lectures, training, and practical dimensions of peace-making civil activism. Since 2015, she has coordinated the Armenia-Georgia expert dialogue process. She is Bertha von Zuttner Peace Prize winner from 2019.

Nino Kobakhidze

Nino Kobakhidze is a Programme Development Consultant at the Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts. She focused on development programs dedicated to peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and youth empowerment in the South Caucasus region.

Nino Kobakhidze holds a Master's degree in political science from Ilia State University, Faculty of Arts and Science, with additional studies at Charles University, Prague.

From 2011 to 2016, Ms. Kobakhidze worked at the Parliament of Georgia in different positions—as an invited specialist at the Foreign Relations Committee and as a Head Specialist at the Cabinet of the Deputy Chairman of the Parliament. She also gained valuable experience as an intern at the European Parliament. She actively engaged in numerous conferences and seminars, contributing to her well-rounded expertise.

Additionally, Ms. Kobakhidze is an invited lecturer at the Business and Technology University, where she has lectured on “Contemporary Society and A Citizen” since 2023.



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