



## **Biden's Vision for Global Democracy After Afghanistan: What Does Georgia Need to Consider?**

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Joe Biden's vision for Global Democracy is so important in the US foreign policy strategy that it is even referred to as the "Biden Doctrine" (Brands 2021). However, even in the new administration's first few days, many had already begun voicing their doubts (Adler and Wertheim 2020). Needless to say, the US-led withdrawal from Afghanistan further complicated Washington's grand plan (Biden 2020) to lead an "Alliance of Democracies".

The US vision for global democracy is especially important for Georgia, as a transitional democracy with an ambition to deepen its strategic partnership with Washington (Samkharadze 2021a). In this context, the Summit for Democracy announced by Biden and scheduled for December is particularly noteworthy in its focus on fighting authoritarianism, corruption and promoting respect for human rights beyond the US borders (The White House 2021b).

With this in mind, it is important that Georgia rekindles discussions on the challenges facing Joe Biden's efforts to build global democracy strategy and issues that the country needs to consider.

### **Biden's Ambition in the Fight for Global Democracy**

During the pre-election period, Joe Biden's vision for global democracy explicitly referenced the fight against declining democratic tendencies in the world (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021): during the campaign, Biden stated that he had ambitions to lead the fight against rising authoritarianism (Biden 2020). According to some, his vision on global democracy is accompanied by a number of dilemmas. There are three main peculiarities that all countries potentially impacted by this plan must consider.

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## *Pragmatism of the Diplomat Biden vs Idealism of the President Biden*

In general, Joe Biden is considered to be a pragmatic diplomat. His views about the free world were pragmatic during the Bush and Obama administrations (Brands 2021; Traub 2021). However, Biden's current rhetoric on global freedom carries a more daring tone with "fight to defend" prevailing over "promoting" democracy around the world (The White House 2021a). Because of this, some researchers view Biden's plan with scepticism (Traub 2021): At first glance, his diplomatic style and current approach to democracy do not seem to be in line with one another.

However, there is a US strategic interest in a rapidly changeable geopolitical situation on the other end of the scale: President Biden's vision is mostly refrained to the subject of competition with big competitors that contributed to the promotion of global democracy in his foreign policy agenda. Confronting to undemocratic Russian and Chinese dominance is among the priorities. Biden's America has to deal with undemocratic competitors through partnerships with "declining" democracies such as NATO member Turkey, EU member Hungary and Poland and others (The Economist 2020). As the president himself states, clashes between democracies and autocracies will dictate today's age, since the form of governance of the 21st century is being determined right now (Brands 2021).

Therefore, at this stage of the US foreign policy planning process, when the country is actively starting to restore its traditional partnerships following the damaged done to this leadership by Donald Trump (Samkharadze 2021a), the US more than ever needs to rally together stable democratic regimes (Vindman 2020). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that Biden and his team will do anything to turn the idea of global democracy into a success story.

### *Rhetoric VS Strategy*

The second issue in Biden's global democracy vision is the link between the President's rhetoric and the strategy. According to him, it is impossible for someone to doubt the effectiveness of democracy in the 21st century (Brooks 2021). It is reasonable to assume that this enthusiasm without the result-oriented action plan would not be very beneficial for US national interests. Therefore, Washington's readiness to actually implement the announced objective is somewhat questionable. The Summit planned for December may be considered as the start of this process.

However, in order to turn the idea of the Summit for Democracy into a more long-term and effective strategy, Washington needs to think about strengthening its partners - full and transitional democracies alike, in terms of resisting the intervention from two major strategic competitors - Russia and China (Quirk 2021). Biden needs to prove that autocracy is not the best form of governance, especially when it comes to ensuring the public welfare, as the increasing economic domination of one-party ruled China may lead some to believe (Wright 2021). Therefore, a specific strategy is expected from the Summit in December, which would demonstrate that for the US, the alliance of partner democracies is an important component in dealing with autocratic competitors.

## *Democracy Domestically and Abroad*

Another peculiarity, frequently highlighted in the post-Trump US, is the state of democracy within the country. In the beginning of 2021, events taking place at Capitol Hill, Washington, demonstrated the anti-democratic tendencies in Washington. It became obvious that Biden would have to deal with internal extremist groups. Therefore, he has been criticised and pointed at the need to “first, heal the country” and protect it from undemocratic tendencies, before spending increased financial and other resources on global democracy (Goldgeier & Jentleson 2020; Crowley 2021).

However, according to some, the Summit for Democracy will be the instrument enabling the US to strengthen democratic values domestically (Brown, Carothers & Pascal 2021). Moreover, given the pace at which democracies around the world continue to decline, the US does not have the luxury to separate internal democratic development from its global democratization strategy (Quarcoo 2021).

Therefore, it can be assumed that according to Biden, the successful implementation of global democracy strategy is an important aspect for the US national security, considering the domestic political context as well. Washington will also struggle to compete with major players if its strategic partners are comprised of weak democracies (Traub 2021).

## **Will the Afghan August Alter the View of American Democracy?**

Events unfolding in Afghanistan in 2021, pointed at numerous tendencies related to US international involvement, which must be considered when discussing “Biden Doctrine”. After almost 20 years of military and civilian operation, with coalition forces leaving Afghanistan, state institutions in the country crumbled surprisingly fast and the government ended up in the hands of the Taliban again, which the international community considers to be a US strategic failure (Mankoff 2021). President Biden defended his decision to leave Afghanistan, arguing that the mission never intended to build a democratic state (The White House 2021c). However, this case still enables the US democratic allies to draw several conclusions about Biden’s overall vision for the global democracy agenda.

After developments in Afghanistan, Biden will have two main topics in the agenda. On the one hand, he needs to strengthen his image as an experienced leader with a reliable foreign policy, and, on the other hand, he will seek to demonstrate that the US remains a global leader on the geopolitical chess board. Even though two other presidents before Biden - Barack Obama and Donald Trump - wanted to withdraw from Afghanistan and public opinion was more or less in unanimous agreement, Biden’s image as a competent leader suffered a significant blow after the end of the mission in Afghanistan (Montanaro 2021) (see Table 1).

## Public backs Afghan troop pullout, gives Biden low marks for handling situation

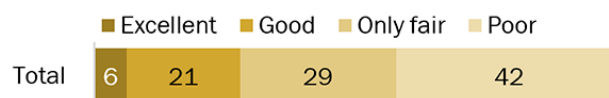
% who say the U.S. decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan was the ...



% who say the U.S. mostly \_\_\_ in achieving its goals in Afghanistan



% who rate the job the Biden administration has done handling the situation in Afghanistan as ...



Note: No answer responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 23-29, 2021.

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Table 1: Public backs Afghanistan troop pullout, gives Biden low marks for handling situation. August, 2021. Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/31/majority-of-u-s-public-favors-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-criticized-for-his-handling-of-situation/>

According to some, the public attitudes are not about whether to withdraw or not, it's about how it was done (Khalid 2021). Therefore, for Biden, achieving other foreign policy objectives, especially the successful implementation of his global democracy project, may have vital importance.

Moreover, while Biden's main global objective is to prove the advantage of democracy over autocracy, at first glance, the theocratic Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan's state institutions may demonstrate quite the opposite (Nicholas 2021). In order to restore trust towards the US as a flagship of the democratic world, Biden will have to show to its international partners that the US remains a committed and reliable supporter of democracy (Nicholas 2021; The Washington Post 2021). In this context, the Summit for Democracy in December must determine Washington's main focus areas in the post-Afghan era.

In geopolitical context, the events in Afghanistan will likely alter the competition dynamics with big players. Even though at this stage Russia does not officially express interest in Afghanistan, it is thought that US withdrawal opened up new opportunities for it in the region: Moscow can strengthen its positions in Afghanistan and beyond, since it already exerts economic, cultural and political influence over Afghanistan's neighborhood (Mankoff 2021). Moreover, other main geopolitical players such as China, Iran and Turkey will be in a better position to find common ground with Afghanistan under Taliban leadership. (The

Economist 2021a), as the uniting factor for illiberal states may become an undemocratic form of governance.

## **The Summit for Democracy and Prospects for Georgia**

The Summit for Democracy planned for December is one of the main components of the “Biden Doctrine” and the list of participants of the Summit will mainly illustrate who is considered to be part of the “Democracy Camp” in Washington. It is likely that the involvement of European democracies “in decline”, such as Poland and Hungary, as well as NATO member Turkey, whose president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is referred to by Biden as an autocratic ruler (The New York Times 2020), will be actively considered. Therefore, the results achieved by its strategic partners in terms of democratization will be significant and this factor should be particularly noteworthy for Georgia, as a US strategic partner and unconsolidated democracy.

### *What Can Georgia Offer to Global Democracy?*

In Georgia’s democratization process, the public and ruling party’s commitment to democratic values is an important factor for maintaining stable US support. For instance, in Washington some think that in the case of Afghanistan, it was local political elite and Afghan society that failed, since they could not consolidate around the country’s interests (The White House 2021c; Ruggiero 2021). Considering this, the Georgian government’s rhetoric on democratic reforms and Western partners does not positively reflect on its goodwill, and can be considered as a risky tendency in the country. The members of the ruling party from time to time criticize institutions, such as the Venice Commission, Embassies of the Western partner nations, and members of the European Parliament (Civil.ge 2021aa, Civil.ge 2021c; Chihuahua 2021), which in the end widen the gap between Georgia and western values and lead to the erosion of democratic institutions from within.

For the approaching Summit for Democracy, important criteria will likely be an independent judiciary and healthy media environment, as well as the level of political competition and proper respect for human rights (Gearan 2021). A couple of months ago, Secretary of State Antony Blinken tasked diplomats to concentrate on issues such as supporting democratic reforms, fighting violation of human rights by security forces, fighting corruption, and ensuring uninterrupted access to pluralist information (Toosi 2021). In the context of these strict requirements and recently unfolding events, Georgia does not show particular progress: the country exhibits the characteristics of a democracy in decline, according to trustworthy international rankings (Freedomhouse 2020; The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021). The latest dynamics of the relationship with Brussels does not imply anything positive on Georgia’s democratisation process either - according to some, Georgia’s government is in an “unprecedented fight with the EU and the United States” (De Waal 2021; Samkharadze 2021c). Critical assessments of the US and the EU member state embassies with regards to various social or political processes are also circling in Washington (US Embassy 2021; Civil.ge 2021b).

In this context, public attitudes in Georgia is also important, according to which, important components of democracy, such as fair elections, and media independence are considered as less important national issues, while more than half (51%) of the population thinks that democracy is non-existent in the country (Table 2, 3).

What are the most important national level issues facing you and your family? Please name up to three. (q9) Open question

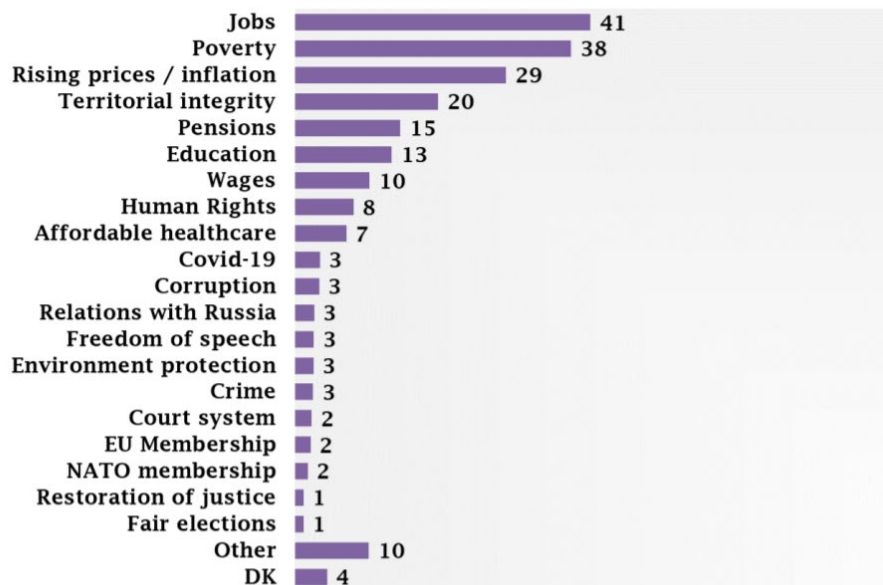
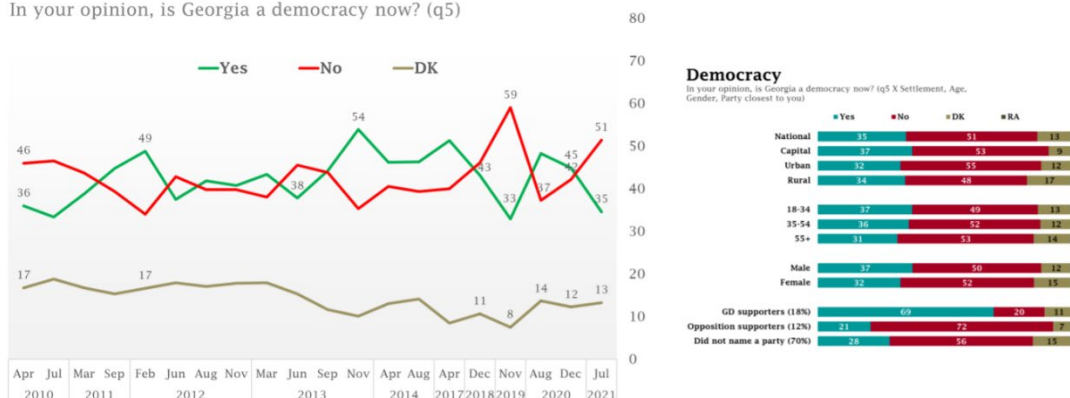


Table 2: Public Attitudes in Georgia, NDI, July, 2021. Source: <https://bit.ly/3o4fwOe>

## Democracy

In your opinion, is Georgia a democracy now? (q5)



In 2020-2021 survey method changed from face-to-face to telephone.

Table 3: Public Attitudes in Georgia, NDI, July, 2021. Source: <https://bit.ly/3o4fwOe>

Besides, if in the case of Georgia, it can be assumed that one of the guarantors of stable Western interest is political, financial or other type of investment (Georgian Institute of Politics 2021b) already made by the West, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan demonstrated that no one can hope for remaining on Washington's radar unconditionally. According to some American experts, one of the lessons learned from Afghanistan is that the US must avoid spending resources on countries that do not seem to be aspiring towards the process of democratization, since in fact, they are so weak that spending time and money on



them is worthless (The Economist 2021b). Conditionality of financial support or political interest is part of the US strategy, a fact Georgia has been reminded of multiple times (Civil.ge 2021c). Therefore, if Georgia does not demonstrate commitment to the process of democratization and institutional resilience, there is a risk that it will stay out of Washington's sphere of strategic interest and the West's in general. With this scenario, Georgia's international isolation is in the interests of Russia only.

### *Why is the Summit for Democracy Important for Georgia?*

As it was already mentioned above, for the US, the idea of global democracy is determined by its national strategic interests, such as dealing with two main global competitors prone to autocratic governance - Russia and China (Quirk & Twining 2020). In this case, hybrid threats from Russia, as well as possible intervention in domestic matters are the areas for Georgia that Tbilisi could focus on: threats coming from Russia are well recognized in the US (Brands 2021) and Georgia's readiness in this context would be very important for Washington.

The role of Georgia, as a promising democracy in the region is very important in geopolitical terms as well, since Georgia has remained to be the only actor with a successful democratisation process east of the Black Sea, as a result of the Karabakh conflict and worsening relationship between the West and Turkey (Samkharadze 2021a). In order to at least maintain this status, it is critically important that Georgia implements several key reforms, since neither international context, not external support and Washington's interest towards global democracy can help Georgia to build a democratic state without internal dynamics (Georgian Institute of Politics 2021a).

For Georgia, it is critically important to be a part of the December Summit for Democracy in one way or another. For this to happen, it is vital that the Government does everything in its power to demonstrate its commitment to democratic principles, especially since there is not much time left before December. Narrowing down the areas for Georgia's strategic involvement with the US as a result of the end of the mission in Afghanistan, further complicates this matter (Samkharadze 2021b). Therefore, the government must use the remaining time to lead main political processes, such as implementation of reforms, and approaching local government elections, in a transparent and democratic manner. Otherwise, there is a risk that democratic backsliding and the complicated political situation in Georgia will see Georgia excluded from the Summit for Democracy, which will be a significant reputational blow to the country's international image.

## **Conclusion**

Even though the "Biden Doctrine" on global democracy still leaves many questions unanswered, the US President stands out with visible commitment to his idea. This vision was further prioritised in Washington's foreign policy agenda after the events in

Afghanistan. Biden's rhetoric is transitioning to a more practical stage and therefore, Washington is getting ready for the Summit for Democracy in December.

For Georgia, it is critically important that the Government uses this opportunity to benefit the country and solidify its place in the democratic world. The December Summit is a milestone in this context, that should demonstrate whether Tbilisi deserves a place in Biden's "Democracy Camp".

The importance of the Summit is growing as Georgia's recent democratic backsliding and flawed implementation of reforms is met with criticism from the West. Therefore, if the Government cannot turn Georgia into an active participant of the "Biden Doctrine", it will be a final confirmation that the West's political interest towards Georgia cannot be maintained and that Georgia has turned its back on building a democratic state. In this case, Georgia, which is already vulnerable to external threats because of a complicated geopolitical location, will have a hard time defending itself from Russia's imperialistic ambitions. To avoid this, it is critically important for the Government to ensure that for the remaining period, every political process is implemented in accordance to democratic principles - in a fair and transparent manner - and to illustrate to the West that keeping on track of democratisation is still the most important aspiration of the country.



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