



## People's Power or Populist Pawns? Examining Georgia's New Anti-Western Political Movement

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The changing face of global geopolitics means that Georgia faces new challenges. Recent events, specifically the Georgian government's critical messages aimed at Georgia's Western partners have left some with the impression that the country's pro-European orientation is in doubt. These doubts have been further reinforced by the emergence of a new political actor called People's Power, which is affiliated with the ruling party and is made up predominantly of figures who were until recently members of the ruling Georgian Dream party or were pro-government journalists or experts. From the outset, this new party has adopted clearly populist and conspiratorial anti-Western messaging which casts doubt on Georgia's established pro-Western foreign policy course.

Given the clearly benign stance of the ruling party towards People's Power, there exists a suspicion that this new force is part of Georgian Dream's electoral strategy to create a satellite party with whom future cooperation will be easy. Georgian Dream realizes that winning a fourth term of office in the 2024 elections will be difficult. As such, it has decided to mitigate this risk through the creation of a satellite party to attract its disaffected socially conservative supporters with anti-Western rhetoric. At the same time, it will seek to distract from its failure to attain Euro-Atlantic integration by pointing the finger of blame at the West. Against this background, it is important to analyse the aims of the new political force in both domestic and foreign policy and whether the appearance of such a force could cause damage to the democratic process.

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## The Phenomenon of Satellite Political Parties in Georgia

In hybrid regimes like Georgia, the creation of a multi-party system is no simple task. In the post-Soviet political culture, in which the indefinite dominance of ruling parties is a widespread norm, it is common for the strategy of “managed democracy” to be used. This can involve active cooperation by ruling parties with satellite parties that are often created by them and whose activities they support (Oversloot & Verheul 2006). This is a way to create an illusion of a multi-party system, a sort of sham democratic process orchestrated by the ruling party to cement its authoritarian rule (Bader 2011; Zurabishvili 2022). As a result, we see what is outwardly a pluralistic party system actually based on a hegemonic power vertical and not on the horizontal cooperation of political parties. This sort of strategy is the norm in authoritarian post-Soviet states such as Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and others where the government is “opposed” on paper by competing parties which are in reality serving the agenda of the ruling party and do not offer a genuine alternative (Stykwow 2016; Gel’Man 2008).

Georgia has a recent history of satellite parties. The Georgian Christian Democratic Movement (CDM), which was established in February 2008 in the run up to parliamentary elections, was seen as such a party. The CDM served the then ruling United National Movement (UNM) party as a “moderate” opposition party during a period in which the latter required rehabilitation after the violent events of 7 November 2007. The financing of the CDM was so closely linked to businesses seen as loyal to the UNM that strong suspicions arose that the CDM was acting in the interests of UNM. The CDM took on the role of a decorative parliamentary opposition whose role entailed attracting votes from the pro-opposition electorate in order to weaken the real opposition while itself posing no real challenge to the ruling party (Zurabishvili 2022). It is revealing that when the UNM moved into opposition, the CDM disappeared from Georgian politics.

This resembles the situation at the end of June 2022, when the People’s Power political force appeared, showing many signs of being a satellite party. The creation and subsequent expansion of People’s Power happened after Georgia’s application for EU candidate status was rejected on 26 June 2022. From 28 June, MPs from the ruling Georgian Dream party left to join this new force in a number of waves. As time progressed, the force attracted new members and resources and was presented to the public as a new political movement.

According to the founders of the movement, their aim is to be able to pass on information to the public more openly than Georgian Dream does (Parliament of Georgia 2022a). The letters written by the group of MPs who “defected” from the ruling party to join this new force reveal its anti-Western, populist and anti-liberal orientation. People’s Power MPs are engaged in attempting to discredit Georgia’s important strategic partners such as the USA and the EU.

There are a number of features of People’s Power that suggest that it could fit the definition of a satellite party. While it is true that these MPs did formally leave the parliamentary majority, close connections with Georgian Dream remain. This leaves a distinct impression that People’s Power is in truth a subdivision of the ruling party that will, if need be, act according to the interests of the latter (კაქკაქიშვილი 2022). It is also quite clear that the messaging of the new movement is not clearly unacceptable to the ruling party. The chair of Georgian Dream, Irakli Kobakhidze, calls the split a result of a “tactical disagreement” (კობახიძე 2022) Furthermore, he has characterised as “honourable colleagues” politicians who use radical and conspiracist language about Georgia’s Western strategic partners and who call EU candidate status meaningless (Subari 2022a). The supposed “defectors” have been seen attending Georgian Dream party meetings which the ruling party explained by saying that they plan to retain their majority in parliament by cooperating with this new faction.

It is rather paradoxical that some of the first “defecting” MPs have a past that is closely linked to promoting Georgia’s pro-Western course within the civil society sector (Interpressnews 2016). Some of the MPs were also among those who “rebelled” in 2019 to vote down Georgian Dream’s promised electoral reform proposals. These people were, even then, identified as those who could be used to achieve political scenarios wanted by Georgian Dream and Bidzina Ivanishvili but which would be unpopular amongst the public and therefore risky for Georgian Dream to support overtly (Civil.ge 2019; Publika 2019; GPB 2019).

As such, the fact that such MPs have joined this new anti-Western political force raises strong suspicions that they are closely affiliated with Georgian Dream which has, as a result of these waves of defection, superficially lost its parliamentary majority. Indeed, the ruling party has been noticeably unworried about losing its majority in this way. Furthermore, of those who joined the new movement in the latest wave who are not MPs, many are journalists and presenters at the clearly pro-government POS-TV channel and ex-civil

servants. This strengthens the impression that People's Power is attempting to create tactical space for Georgian Dream and serve its interests in domestic politics where needed while allowing Georgian Dream to appear relatively moderate to foreign audiences (Devdariani 2022).

## **Georgian Foreign Policy Posture According to People's Power**

The foreign policy orientation of People's Power is formally pro-Western, though in reality it is a mix of radical right-wing ideology and anti-West scepticism. Despite the fact that their attitude towards public communications differs from that of Georgian Dream, the ruling party maintains close ties with these MPs. Since the group first broke away, the MPs have published over 15 documents on the official Parliament website which allow us to define the contours of their foreign policy stance to some extent.

### ***(1) Myths About the EU and Loss of Sovereignty***

The first members of the group defected from Georgian Dream at the end of June 2022. This was soon after the European Council's decision to withhold candidate status to Georgia. However, one of the original four defectors, Dimitri Khundadze, was already making anti-European, conspiracist statements before the announcement, stating that there was an impression that "Georgia's independence is once again under threat" (ხუნდაძე 2022). Later, a similar sentiment was repeated by one of the founders of People's Power and former Georgian Dream leading figure Sozar Subari who said "membership of the EU means relinquishing some level of sovereignty" (სუბარი 2022b).

When the first few MPs defected, the main focus of the group's rhetoric was discounting the importance of EU candidate status, often on the basis of anti-state and conspiracist statements. The group states that candidate status is "pointless" and that for countries like Moldova, Europe has "at minimum, abandoned them to face severe economic problems" (სუბარი 2022a). They also state that "no one can explain why it is in Georgia's interests to gain candidate status on an expedited basis so the fuss around this question must be totally artificial" (Parliament of Georgia 2022b).

When dissatisfaction with the government grew as a result of the failure to secure EU candidate status (RFE/RL 2022), and multiple days of protests began, People's Power tried to present the situation as if "the country has not lost out on anything important at all".

Indeed, they intimated that Georgia had avoided a destructive outcome, which was to an extent, the narrative promoted by Georgian Dream (ღარიბაშვილი 2022). It should be noted, that the group ignores the EU's stabilisation function in the country which Brussels has taken on since the 2008 Russia-Georgia war in the form of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM). Since Russia expelled the OSCE and UN from the conflict zones, this has been the sole international force observing the situation between Georgia and Russia and its occupied territories.<sup>3</sup>

## *(2) Narrative Against the USA and Being "Dragged into the War"*

After the EU, the MPs defecting from Georgian Dream directed their aggression towards the US Embassy. According to People's Power "it is becoming clear that the [US] Embassy's efforts are directed against Georgian law enforcement structures and against the rule of law" (Parliament of Georgia 2022d). According to group members the Embassy has "a totally disrespectful and rude attitude towards Georgian sovereignty and state institutions" (Parliament of Georgia 2022c). These unprecedented allegations by People's Power not only damage Georgian national interests, but also support Kremlin well-known propaganda narratives and harm the bilateral partnership between Georgia and the US.

The group's anti-American conspiracist narrative focusses on the idea of Georgia being dragged into the war in Ukraine and being forced to open a second front. "The Georgian people need to decide. Either we acquiesce to the [US] Embassy's wish for Georgia to become a second front, or an assessment needs to be made as to the extent to which [the US] wish for Georgia to join the war against Russia without any guarantees is legitimate and acceptable" (Parliament of Georgia 2022e). They also complain that US financial assistance to Georgia which has been yielding results for 30 years does not go fully to Georgia's interest (Parliament of Georgia 2022f).

The US ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degan, has also been a target of People's Power conspiracist attacks. In their narrative, she is depicted as being in cahoots with "radical groups" in the opposition and civil society sector to bring about chaos and undermine sustainable development of the country. For example, according to one of the official statements from the movement, the Embassy - by supporting the Georgia NGO ISFED - has directly told Georgian Dream that a revolution must happen and that the United National

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<sup>3</sup> The EU is contributing an increasing sum of money to ensuring the success of this mission. The mission was initially given a budget of \$31 million, but the current phase of the mission is funded to the tune of \$45 million (EUMM, 2022; The Council of the EU 2008)

Movement must be returned to power in order to open a second front (Imedi TV 2022). By communicating such propagandistic public messages, the defecting MPs are challenging the decades-old strategic partnership between the US and Georgia and are actively trying to create friction in this relationship. But group's strategy makes more sense in a context where the government has earned criticism from the EU, NATO and the US Embassy for democratic backsliding and failure to implement reforms (Department of State 2022).

### *(3) Switzerland's democratic deficit?*

Switzerland began to feature in the rhetoric of the People's Power movement when the problems between the Swiss bank, Credit Suisse, and the founder of Georgian Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili, became public knowledge. The subject of the official statements of the organisation was the state of modern Swiss democracy. According to the "defectors" Switzerland is "historically a leading European democracy...However, elite interests have established a governance model involving an unjust court system and unfree media" (GPB 2022).

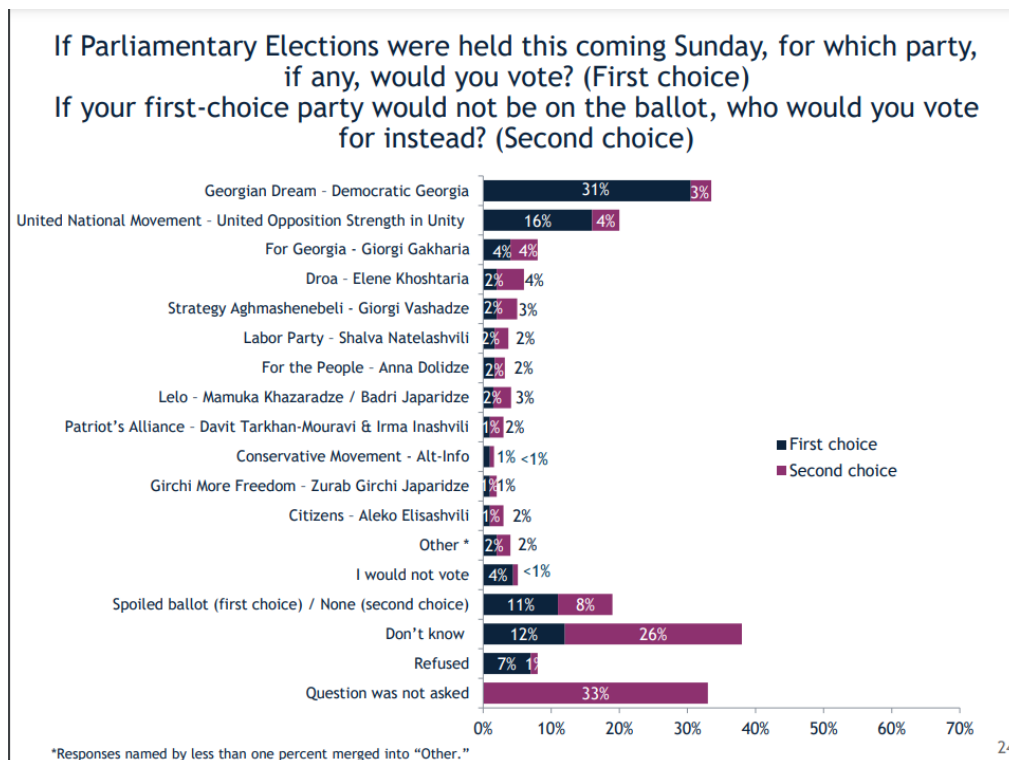
They then conclude that "we do not need a Europe in which banks, courts and the media work in total coordination to undermine human rights" (GPB 2022). This sounded a lot like an attempt to delegitimise the benefits of EU candidate status in the eyes of the public. In this case, the difference is that while at first People's Power was attempting to make excuses for Georgian Dream's failure in Euro-Atlantic integration, this time they attacked the entire Swiss model of governance in order to protect the image of one person – Georgian Dream's founder and the person widely believed to be the informal leader of the country, Bidzina Ivanishvili. These anti-European statements echo the rhetoric of the ruling party about Ivanishvili. An example of this was the letter sent by Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili on behalf of the Georgian government to EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in which the EU Commission was asked not to discuss Ivanishvili in the context of the de-oligarchisation requirement set out by the EU as a condition of granting candidate status (საქართველოს მთავრობა 2022). By doing this, the government is casting doubt its own narrative that Ivanishvili is merely a private individual who does not interfere in public politics and who does not have any influence on the Georgian government. All of this further strengthens the suspicion that People's Power's criticism of Switzerland was an attempt to pursue the interests of Ivanishvili. One can conclude that People's Power attempting to deflect the blame for Georgia's failure to attain EU candidate status away from the government.

## People's Power – What Resources Does It Possess and What Are Its Real Aims?

This paper has established that the narrative being spread by People's Power is distinctively anti-Western, but it is also important to consider what impact or potential influence on the country's future development this may have. Hence it is also important to ascertain what resources this force possesses and its real aims, that are closely connected with those of Georgian Dream.

Georgian Dream has several reasons why it may wish to create such a force. IRI opinion polls have shown that the ruling party has lost some support over the past few months. The party's projected share of the vote in the polls has fallen 6% in the last 6 months (figures 1, 2) which the ruling party is trying to counter using different methods including this one mentioned above.

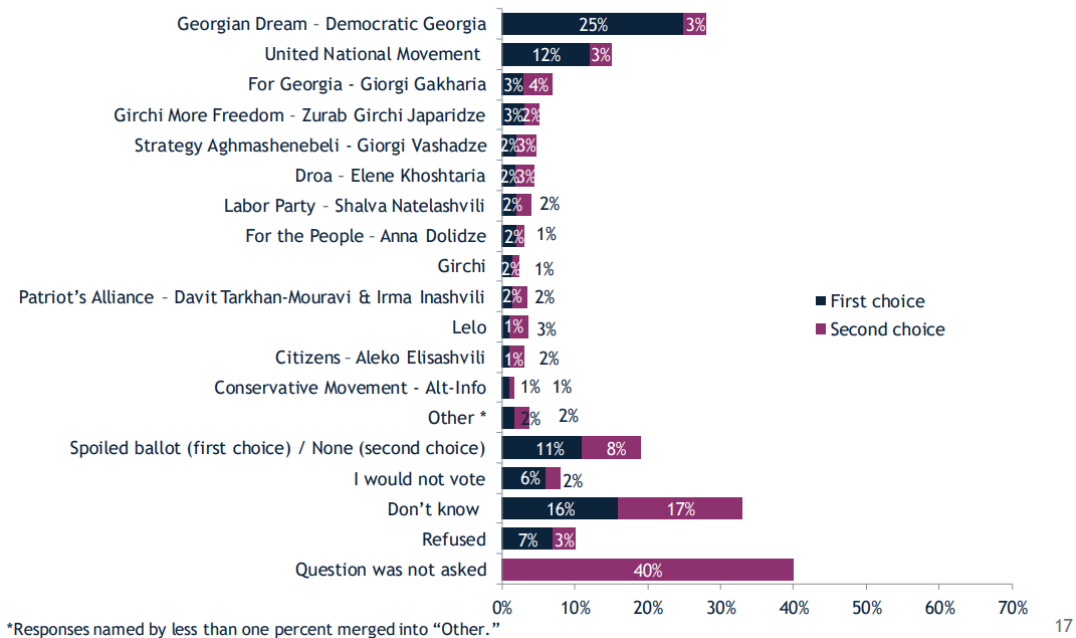
**Figure 1:** *If Parliamentary elections were to be held next week, which party would you vote for (first choice)? March 2022*



*figshare* <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-georgia-september-2022/>

Figure 2: If Parliamentary elections were to be held next week, which party would you vote for (first choice)? September 2022

If Parliamentary Elections were held this coming Sunday, for which party, if any, would you vote? (First choice)  
 If your first-choice party would not be on the ballot, who would you vote for instead? (Second choice)



*by* <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-georgia/>

In this context, Georgian Dream needs to ensure that at least some of the voters it has lost move to supporting a party it controls. However, given the ruling party is forced to maintain a formally pro-Western course, a force like People’s Power is also needed to influence domestic politics, helping the ruling party to be seen as a moderate guarantor of stability in the country.

Moreover, the „defection” of these MPs has actually resulted in Georgian Dream suddenly formally losing its majority in Parliament without much fanfare or concern from the ruling party. This enables the ruling party to create the illusion that it is not responsible for decisions made by Parliament. Considering this, it is possible that for future important



political processes, such as on constitutional issues or the election of a new public defender, we could see a repeat of what happened when Georgian Dream's promised proportional electoral reform failed to pass. This means that People's Power MPs can act as a lightning rod for Georgian Dream while hindering or exerting a negative influence on the reform process in a way that reduces the level of responsibility of the ruling party.

Another possible future function of People's Power could be that the ruling party uses it to form a coalition government or an alliance which will allow it to superficially fulfil public preferences for coalition governance and cooperation between parties (Edison Research 2020; CRRC 2021). As a result, we may end up with a quasi-coalition which will allow Georgian Dream to avoid cooperating with other opposition actors. This fulfils two aims for them. It superficially fulfils democratic criteria, but it also enables them to avoid having to deal with parties they see as "radical opposition" with whom GD traditionally have toxic relations.

In the longer term, People's Power can exert influence in two ways. Firstly, the group aims to spread propagandistic narratives that are damaging to the state interest but beneficial for the ruling party. It has more than sufficient resources for this as we can see from the fact that one of the members of the group is the owner of a pro-government TV channel. It is true that the extent to which voters will accept this narrative is uncertain. But there is a risk that Georgian Dream will use the activities of this group to disorient public opinion and distract from its own failures in achieving European integration and maintain support amongst sections of the electorate that risk being lost due to this failure.

The group also potentially has some chance of mobilising conservative voters in the 2024 election. By attracting these voters, the group can boost the overall vote for parties willing to support a Georgian Dream led government. Given that the popularity of openly pro-Russian conservative parties is falling from an already low base given Russia's losses in Ukraine, Georgian Dream has an opportunity to use this anti-Western populist party to play a double game. It can keep pro-Western voters under its own banner while attracting anti-liberal voters to this new party.

## **New Risks to Multiparty Democracy in Georgia**

People's Power only appeared a few months ago. But, thanks to its close relationship to the ruling party and significant political, human and financial resources, it has some potential

to, within a very short period of time, influence the country's domestic and foreign policy trajectory. If successful, it will be able to hinder the functioning of democratic processes in the legislature in such a way that reduces the ruling party's level of responsibility. In parallel, it also allows for the dissemination of political narratives that would be damaging if they came directly from Georgian Dream (for example, direct criticism of the West and entering into open conflict with Western officials).

In the context of Georgia's failure to attain EU candidate status and the attendant disappointment in society, Georgian Dream decided it needed to create a new force to help enable it to remain in control of the levers of government. It appears that, in the long term, the ruling party's strategy is for this new satellite party to act as a lightning rod and move Georgia closer to the "managed democracy" model seen elsewhere in the post-Soviet space. Overall, if this trend continues, it could not only endanger Georgia's democratic future, but also the country's Euro-Atlantic ambitions.

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