

EXPERTS COMMENT

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საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

Georgia's Slide to Authoritarianism: Can the International Society Save the Democracy Here?

The ruling Georgian Dream majority overrode the president's veto on the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, commonly referred to as the foreign agents' law or the Russian law. The law was subsequently passed with 84 votes in favor and 4 against, marking the final step for the controversial legislation to be enforced. This move poses a significant threat to Georgia's democracy, placing the country in the category of semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes, according to a Freedom House report. Georgia's long-standing Western partners in Washington and Brussels had repeatedly urged the Georgian government to reject the controversial bill. However, the Georgian Dream decided to enact the law, ignoring international recommendations and domestic public uprisings.

At the request of the **Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)**, a selection of experts from different countries responded to the following questions:

- 1. How can the international community respond to the undemocratic developments and the Georgian Dream government's shift towards authoritarianism?*
- 2. What can civil society do to withstand the existing pressure in the current context?*

Tanja A. Börzel

Professor of Political Science, the Chair for European Integration at the Otto-Suhr-Institute for Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin



There is no evidence that the international society can save democracy. States, international organizations, and transnational NGOs can do two things, however: impose costs on governments who attack democracy, and empower domestic actors who defend democracy.

The EU and the U.S. can consider targeted sanctions on actors who support the dismantling of democratic institutions and the repression of the political opposition and civil society in Georgia. The EU should also apply strict conditionality in the accession process of Georgia. Finally, the foreign agent law may render financial support for Georgia's political opposition and civil society difficult. Yet, international actors, both governmental and non-governmental, can provide legitimacy and knowledge.

Christofer Berglund

Associate Professor, Malmö University



Semi-authoritarian governance and political polarization has long been the norm in Georgia. This crisis is different because the government's power grab is occurring in tandem with a tectonic geopolitical shift, which threatens to undo the international linkages that prevent worse authoritarian excesses. Sanctions against individuals responsible for undermining Georgia's democratic development might speed up defections from the corridors of power. But it is also critical to call out the false promise that Georgia could enter the EU in 2030 without first committing to the political rights and civil freedoms that define the union; and to guard against malfeasance in the run-up to the October elections.

Georgians were never the ones to go "Bowling Alone," to paraphrase Putnam. That is, civil society is more than its legal entities; it consists of social networks that make collaboration and collective action among individuals more effective. Judging from recent protests, I expect civil society to be resilient enough to continue to fulfill their function as whistleblowers in the period leading up to the elections. At this point, Georgian voters - and election administrators - will face a fundamental choice with both their democratic and European future on the line. Courage is contagious but so is silence.

Stefan Meister

DGAP, Head of Center for Order and Governance in Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia



Georgian Dream government is still a democratic elected government, it is not so easy to just punish them for voting in the parliament, even if it means a shift towards autocracy. It is obvious, that this government wants to spoiler EU integration of Georgia. For the EU the consequence is to cut off most of the financial support for the government. All those who decide about or practices violence against peaceful demonstrators can come under a visa and travel ban. Crucial will be the parliamentary election in autumn: If there are (more or less) free and fair elections and GD will win, the EU will withdraw candidate status and visa free travel. If GD will manipulate elections, they will be sanctions on visa, assets, and all funding.

Civil society has to build up an alternative political force to the opposition, which is rather part of the problem than the solution. It needs to reach out to the broader society and explain, what are the consequences of the authoritarian policy. The election will be crucial as a momentum of change, where civil society will play a key role to consolidate an alternative to an authoritarian GD and opposition which has first of all its own vested interests. Especially the organized civil society needs to address the real problems of the Georgian society, which is the socio-economic situation but not sovereignty or identity policy.

Beka Kobakhidze

Full Professor, Ilia State University



This battle against authoritarianism needs to be won domestically, but it cannot be won without foreign support. Solid and targeted sanctions from both the EU and the US will expose the "Russian face" of the GD government, helping those Georgians who are still uncertain about their choices and boosting the morale of civil society. Every state institution in Georgia, except for the presidency, is under government control. There is every reason to believe that the elections will be neither free nor fair. Through foreign and domestic pressures, the GD's coercive power must be weakened to the point that the regime is unable to rig the elections.

Tracey German

Professor, King's College London



The international community, in particular the US and its Western allies, must continue to engage with Georgia at both the political and societal levels, and avoid any wishful thinking about what ‘might’ happen next. The West also needs to present a far more compelling case for liberal democracy, whilst continuing to support those within the country seeking to re-establish democratic norms and principles.

Georgia’s elections in October remain the best hope of resolving this – at the ballot box, using the tools of democracy to oust a ruling party that has adopted increasingly authoritarian practices. Civil society should continue to seek to hold GD to account, publicly denouncing those actions that fall short of democratic norms. It should also seek to avoid exacerbating the polarisation of Georgian society, which works in favour of both the ruling GD party and actors such as Russia, who (even if not directly involved) would be content to see Georgia divided and destabilised further.

Thomas de Waal

Senior Fellow, Carnegie Europe



This is a pivotal moment for Georgia. Georgian Dream evidently know that it has jeopardized the country’s EU accession process and does not care—they believe that regime survival is more important. Perhaps, they believe that the European Parliament elections will confirm an illiberal trend in Europe and that Hungary will save them from sanctions.

The most important thing by far is the parliamentary elections. In a fair vote GD will have many problems. It is crucially important to demand a high standard of conduct of the elections and to promise the most severe consequences if high standards are not met. Georgian democracy may not survive otherwise.

Civil society organizations have difficult choices to make. Whether it is to register themselves, close down or relocate, their international partners need to respect their wishes and give them all support they can to survive.

Levan Kakhishvili

A postdoctoral researcher at the European Politics Research Group at ETH Zurich



The EU can make use of the conditionality policy that it has at place. However, this would imply that people of Georgia will suffer the consequences if the “carrot” is taken away. If Georgia as a country is punished, e.g., by suspending the visa-free regime, or taking away the candidate status, the EU risks disappointing pro-EU part of the society and antagonizing those Georgians who are willing to consider alternative foreign policy options.

Personal sanctions against Georgian politicians can be another option but this will feed the anti-EU rhetoric and narratives of the Georgian Dream, portraying itself a victim for the simple reason of “fulfilling their duty.” Sadly, this rhetoric works on parts of the Georgian voters and the sanctions will potentially increase affective polarization in the society. The final alternative could be suspending the programmes supporting the Georgian government, but this too will be reflected on the wider population. Therefore, the EU must maintain a fine balance between responding decisively to the crisis in Georgia and at the same time demonstrating to the Georgian people that Brussels is committed to Georgia’s European path. However, there is no single best option for the EU response. Instead, it is high time for Georgia to look for solutions to domestic problems at home. For this, it is necessary for political parties and public officials to rise to the occasion. The former needs to create a positive political agenda and communicate it effectively to the voters, while the latter needs to show their agency independently from Georgian Dream.

Civil society needs a large-scale mobilization not unlike the 2012. Today, however, there is no single actor that can finance this mobilization and consolidate the efforts to direct the momentum towards winning the upcoming elections. This is a task for the political actors. Yet, the civil society organizations can undertake three tasks: communicate effectively with all voters including those who are the victims of the fear-mongering rhetoric of Georgian Dream; monitor and observe the electoral campaigns and the conduct of elections; consult and push political parties for cooperation. The communication part should focus on deconstructing the Georgian Dream’s narratives about the potential war, sovereignty, as well as the pseudo pro-Europeanness. It is necessary to reach all parts of the society, especially beyond the capital. The monitoring part should focus on closely watching the activities of Georgian Dream and exposing irregularities, particularly, practices of electoral clientelism, which is covert and hard to detect. Finally, the consultation part should focus on helping parties in creating the positive programmatic campaign so that voters are aware what policies to expect following the elections. Furthermore, it is essential that parties with little resources combine efforts to counter the clientelistic practices employed by Georgian Dream. Canvassing may be an option in this regard. Forging consensual politics especially under the umbrella of President Salome Zourabichvili’s Georgian Charter should be a priority.



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Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

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