



Who is Georgia Voting for in 2024?

Electoral Subjects – Strengths and Challenges

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In the parliamentary elections of October 26, 2024, Georgian society has to vote not only for the assembly and the government but also the fundamental foreign policy direction of the country. In recent years, the ruling Georgian Dream party has cast doubt on the Western foreign policy course and democratic development chosen by the Georgian people. During this period, freedom of speech, human rights, and a values-based pro-Western foreign policy have faced significant challenges, placing Georgia at risk of international isolation and domestic repression. Consequently, the 2024 parliamentary elections are widely seen as a referendum on the democratic and European future of Georgia (Zurabishvili 2024; Linderman 2024; Thornton 2024).

In this context, the importance of the pro-Western opposition is critically increasing, and naturally, questions arise about the overall landscape and the readiness of opposition electoral subjects to compete with the ruling party. This is especially relevant given that the October elections will be held under a new, fully proportional electoral system, and the Georgian Dream party, whose support is reportedly declining according to public opinion polls (Caucasus Barometer n.d), needs to secure a constitutional majority to firmly maintain

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power. Despite the perceived vulnerability of the ruling party, the pre-election period does not guarantee a unified victory for the opposition players.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to review the strengths and weaknesses of the main actors of the fast-approaching elections, considering that 18 different party lists have been registered. Will Georgian voters support at the ballot box a return of the country to pro-Western and democratic tracks? This policy memorandum focuses on the parties and coalitions that, according to the latest polls by Edison Research (Formula News 2024), are expected to overcome the electoral threshold. They include *Georgian Dream*, *Unity–National Movement (U–NM)*, *For Georgia*, *Strong Georgia*, and *Coalition for Changes*. Three of these subjects represent a united political center within the framework of pre-election mobilization, while the other two are participating independently. Each player is analyzed in three main areas: strengths, weaknesses, and the combination of both (factors that can simultaneously positively and negatively affect electoral success).

Alone Fighters: Georgian Dream, For Georgia

Electoral entities that have chosen to participate in the elections independently, without aligning with any major power, assert their ability to mobilize sufficient public support in the pre-election period. Currently, Georgian Dream is aiming for a constitutional majority and is regarded as an accountable, independent party. However, no authoritative surveys confirm the necessary public support for their goal of securing a constitutional majority. Meanwhile, the For Georgia party, led by former prime minister and Georgian Dream member Giorgi Gakharia positions itself as center-to-center-left and appears to be a possible key part of a minority coalition.

- ***Georgian Dream: A Leviathan of Georgian Party Politics***

Georgian Dream has been in power in Georgia since 2012, winning a total of eight elections during this period – three parliamentary, three local, and two presidential – however, with a declining trend in electoral support. At this stage, Georgian Dream is the only party that claims to be aiming for a constitutional majority, making its election goal of securing three-quarters of the parliamentary seats a significant challenge (Kobakhidze 2024). The ruling party has certain strengths and weaknesses, which collectively provide a preliminary insight into its potential electoral outcomes (Table 1).

Several factors are likely to work in favor of Georgian Dream in achieving its electoral goals. To start with, as the ruling party, it has significant financial and institutional resources at its disposal for various projects. These projects, often infrastructure, are unofficially and traditionally part of the pre-election campaign in Georgian political culture. This is particularly relevant in municipalities outside Tbilisi, where extensive reconstruction and restoration works are ongoing (Imedi 2024a, 2024b). Being the ruling party, Georgian Dream is able to effectively use administrative resources to attract votes beyond its core supporters (ISFED 2024). This is usually a crucial tool. Another advantage is the party's consistent participation in elections under the same name and visual identity. For some voters, this stability can be a decisive factor in choosing their preferred candidate. Lastly, Georgian Dream has included many authoritative and well-known candidates in its 2024 electoral list, such as Olympic champions and famous TV personalities.

Some Georgian Dream advantages, however, may also serve as weaknesses, negatively impacting the party's election results. For instance, the party's tenure in power—the longest in the recent history of independent Georgia—coupled with unpopular, anti-democratic actions and low levels of positive evaluations (23%, according to Caucasus Barometer, 2024), has led a significant portion of society to desire a change in governance (Formula News, 2024). Additionally, the Achilles heel of the party is its operation under the direct influence of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. This is evident in several aspects:

- the frequent and mechanical rotation of party leadership and government members, indicating a lack of intra-party democracy and centralized decision-making;
- the rhetoric of party leaders who portray Ivanishvili as not only the guarantor of the party's stability but also of the country's (Kaladze, 2024); and
- during times of crisis, Ivanishvili returns to active politics and the top of the electoral list, which suggests that the party's strength and credibility are wavering and that it requires additional support to achieve a constitutional majority.

Additionally, the emotional and simplistic pre-election messages offered to voters are predominantly national-populist and radically anti-Western. This approach fundamentally harms the country's democratic and European future. These messages also contradict public opinion, and it is likely that Georgian Dream will lose a significant portion of voters due to fatigue from its increasingly autocratic rule. Furthermore, the party lacks stable partners and allies both domestically and internationally.

In the domestic dimension, Georgian Dream adheres to repressive narratives (Georgian Dream, 2024), which not only heightens the risk of damaging polarization during elections

but also eliminates the possibility of future inter-party dialogue and cooperation—such dialogue is essential for ensuring the stability of not only its voter base but also the country as a whole.

Table 1. Strengths and Challenges of GEORGIAN DREAM

Historical stability	Victory in eight elections, the largest number compared to other parties, providing the party with a stable profile.	As a result of long-term governance, there is increased fatigue and demand for change in society.
Visual identity	Due to stability, it is easy for voters to identify the party.	
Party composition	Publicly known and respected faces on the party list, such as, for example, Olympic champions.	A single leader. Lack of women in the ruling circles of the party.
Resources	Access to administrative resources. Availability of adequate financial resources for offices, including regional offices.	
Pre-election content	Pre-election content is emotional, simple, and grabs voters' attention.	The messages are populist, vague, and inconsistent.
Inter-political dynamics		Extremely polarizing, exclusionary, and uncooperative narratives.
International relations		Isolation of the party and alienation from Western strategic partners. Increasing association with unreliable and illiberal actors.

Source: material processed by the authors

- *For Georgia: One of Many Third Powers*

Gakharia's party, For Georgia, emerged as an independent political player in 2021, although it is a splinter group from Georgian Dream. Thus, many of its leaders and members are experienced and familiar faces to the public. The party positions itself as a parliamentary opposition entity. So far, it has only participated in the 2021 local elections, where it achieved significant success by securing seats in seven out of 69 municipal councils (Netgazeti, 2021) (Appendix 1). The party has stated that it does not intend to cooperate with either of the two leading parties in the 2024 elections and aims to lead a minority coalition. In this context, the advantages and weaknesses that could influence the party's electoral outcomes are noteworthy (Table 2).

Among its advantages, several factors stand out. Firstly, it is the only opposition party that consists of former leaders and members of the ruling Georgian Dream party, giving them valuable experience in state management. This experience will significantly aid them in coming up with relevant programs and maintaining access to various dimensions of administrative resources. Additionally, for former pro-European supporters of Georgian Dream, For Georgia is seen as a comfortable and reliable alternative. The party's composition, which includes authoritative professionals as members or advisers, suggests a space for objective discussion and goodwill. Furthermore, as part of the pro-Western opposition wing, the party is easily perceived as part of a broader camp by voters, which is an additional positive factor, especially after joining the Georgian Charter, the pro-Western plan of the president. The party's experience in inter-party cooperation in city councils and the pre-election cooperation attempt between Gakharia and Mamuka Khazaradze, Chairman of the Lelo for Georgia party, are also considered added values.

However, the last factor may also be perceived as a weakness. The party has repeatedly underlined that it will not form a governmental coalition with either of the two largest electoral forces, Georgian Dream or United National Movement (founded and still dominated by Mikheil Saakashvili) (Bokuchava 2024). If the party fails to form a minority coalition (which appears to be a real risk), For Georgia could become an obstacle to balancing Georgian Dream in creating an opposition coalition, potentially leading to a post-election parliamentary crisis. The experience of forming and then collapsing coalitions with United National Movement within city councils also risks undermining public trust in the party. Additionally, the public perception of the leader of the party can also be considered both a risk and an advantage. On the one hand, the negative memory of Gakharia's role

during “Gavrilov’s Night” (when Russian lawmaker Sergei Gavrilov presided over a session in the Georgian parliament in 2019) as the then-Minister of Internal Affairs remains relevant (RFE/EL, 2024). On the other hand, his image as a strong leader during his tenure as prime minister brings significant societal acceptance. Despite its declared pro-European platform, For Georgia has not sought to associate with any European party group, a move that could have provided important connections and potential political support from the Western political elites.

Table 2. Strengths and Challenges of FOR GEORGIA

Historical stability	Experience in management. Positive experience of their first elections.	Negative memory of “Gavrilov’s Night” in society.
Visual identity	A leader-oriented designation.	
Party composition	Authoritative and experienced figures as members or advisors within the party.	Gender imbalance: only six women in the top 20 of the party electoral list, and only two in the top ten.
Resources	Legacy of being in government/ some connections to administrative resources.	
Pre-election content	Declared pro-European and pro-democracy platform.	
Inter-political dynamics	Experience in negotiations and inter-party cooperation.	Potential risks on the composition of a coalition government based on the declared position of the party.
International relations	Lack of particularly close ties and problematic relations with the West.	

Source: material processed by the authors

- ***Unity–National Movement: Still the Largest Opposition Force***

The informal “Unity” coalition U–NM includes three parties: United National Movement (led by Saakashvili), Strategy Aghmashenebeli (led by Giorgi Vashadze), and European Georgia (chaired by Davit Bakradze and then Giga Bokeria). This unified oppositional group is based on United National Movement, the largest opposition party. According to various sociological surveys, United National Movement has the highest electoral support after Georgian Dream. However, it also records the highest rate in public opinion polls for the question: “Which party would you never vote for” (Caucasus Barometer, n.d.; IRI, 2023).

The strengths of U–NM include several important factors (Table 3). To begin with, the main forces of the union have extensive experience in state governance, providing them with more stable support compared to other opposition actors. The memory of successful reforms carried out during the rule of United National Movement allows them to actively engage in election campaigns and come up with specific visions and mechanisms in various policy directions. Additionally, each party in the union has strong ties to Western political circles, for example, United National Movement and European Georgia are members of the European People’s Party (EPP), and Strategy Aghmashenebeli is a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE Party). The leaders’ significant and intensive ties with Brussels and Washington potentially enables them to help the country quickly return to European tracks and restore Western confidence in a future coalition government. Furthermore, United National Movement is the only opposition party with extensive regional representation throughout Georgia and a somewhat loyal ideological voter base. As an established party with its own regalia, it is one of the most recognizable political entities, which sharpens voter focus and mitigates the risk of confusion.

However, several factors may cast doubt on the coalition. The three political parties consist mainly of members who previously worked with or for the United National Movement party. The name itself is a slight modification of the name of the largest party within it. This creates two main risks: dominance of one power within the union and unclear prospects for broader inter-party cooperation. The dominant electoral resources of United National Movement could lead it to hijack coalition negotiations in the future, necessitating strong competition and legitimacy from other opposition parties to mitigate this risk.

Additionally, the abolition of gender quotas negatively impacted the coalition, as U–NM failed to maintain a gender-balanced list. The lack of female politicians could be seen as a shortcoming, particularly from the perspective of female voters. Furthermore, United

National Movement, the ruling power during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, has reportedly avoided offering its own vision of the country’s security policy to voters, causing some ambiguity regarding the party’s stance on this particular issue (Bokuchava, 2024). Finally, an additional risk is that entities and splinter parties have separated from United National Movement over time (e.g., Ahali).

Table 3. Strengths and Challenges of UNITY-NATIONAL MOVEMENT (U-NM)

Historical stability	<p>Unity of actors with experience in state governance.</p> <p>Electoral support for United National Movement, including in the regions.</p>	<p>Negative memory of the ruling period in a significant portion of voters.</p>
Visual identity	<p>Maintaining the visual identity of United National Movement helps maintain the recognizability of the group.</p>	<p>A visual identity focused on United National Movement raises some question regarding the prospect of equal cooperation within the union.</p>
Party composition	<p>Experienced former leaders who have trust from a significant part of the opposition electorate.</p>	<p>Sharp focus on leaders.</p> <p>Lack of women in the ruling circles (despite that the current chair of the main party is a woman).</p>
Resources	<p>Legacy of being in the government and party resources in the regions.</p>	<p>Potential transfer of a part of the past support base of United National Movement to Ahali.</p>
Pre-election content	<p>Unity around a pro-Western platform.</p>	<p>Populist content.</p> <p>A number of important topics are avoided.</p>

Inter-political dynamics		Inclined to dominate the political process.
International relations	Strong connections with the European and Western political elites in general.	

Source: material processed by the authors

- ***Strong Georgia: A Key Player in the Pro-Western Alliance***

The Strong Georgia coalition brings together several parties, including Lelo for Georgia (founded by businessmen Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze), For the People (led by attorney and professor Ana Dolidze), Citizens (led by Tbilisi mayoral candidate Aleko Elisashvili), and the political movement Freedom Square (led by political scientist Levan Tsutskiridze). Amalgamated around the principles of “freedom, development, and patriotism,” its electoral list features both seasoned politicians and newcomers from various fields (dzlieri9.ge). Alongside Coalition for Changes and Gakharia’s For Georgia, it forms a significant pro-European center, counterbalancing the forces that have previously ruled the country (Formula News, 2024).

Several factors highlight the union’s strengths (Table 4). Like Coalition for Changes, Strong Georgia unites multiple parties, diversifying its platform and attracting voters from different backgrounds. The inclusion of new faces not previously engaged in active politics alongside experienced politicians may appeal to undecided voters (RFE/RL, 2024b). Additionally, the union’s gender-balanced electoral list, especially significant following the abolition of parliamentary gender quotas, features nine female candidates in its top ten (RFE/RL, 2024a). The inclusion of Georgia’s fourth president, Giorgi Margvelashvili, who joined the union on September 25 (RFE/RL, 2024b), adds further credibility due to his state management experience and precedent for his peaceful transfer of power to President Salome Zurbishvili. Moreover, Strong Georgia has a notable presence in the regions, ensuring that regional issues are well represented in its election program (Samkharadze, 2024).

However, some challenges remain. The leading role of the Lelo for Georgia party within the union, evident in its visual identity, raises questions about the balance and decision-making mechanisms inside the coalition. Additionally, the public image of some union leaders may negatively impact its electoral success. The disrupted negotiations with For Georgia,

initiated by the president, have also raised doubts about Strong Georgia and its cohesion – despite it showing the readiness of the coalition to cooperate (Civil.ge, 2024a). This is particularly concerning given the increasing emphasis on mutual cooperation between potential coalition government members and election subjects.

Table 4. Pre-election Advantages and Weaknesses of STRONG GEORGIA

Historical stability	Experience of working in the Parliament. Positive experience of their first elections.	Negative attitudes among part of the society toward some party leaders.
Visual identity	Updated visual identity, but with strong elements of Lelo for Georgia.	
Party composition	A diverse composition and a significant number of women are in the top 20 of the party list.	
Resources	Significant financial resources/ experience of working in the parliament.	
Pre-election content	Declared pro-European and pro-democracy platform.	Unity of ideologically different parties, which may threaten the stability of the union.
Inter-political dynamics	Experience in negotiations and inter-party cooperation.	Dominance of Lelo for Georgia and doubts about the balance of power within the union.
International relations	Member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE Party).	

Source: material processed by the authors

- *Coalition for Change: Unifying Around Ideology*

The Coalition for Change is a union of Ahali (founded in 2024 by former United National Movement Chairman Nika Melia and television executive Nika Gvaramia), Droa (led by activist Elene Khoshtaria), and Girchi–More Freedom (led by politician Zurab Japaridze). Like Strong Georgia, its electoral list includes both seasoned politicians and newcomers. Together with other actors, the coalition forms a significant pro-European center ahead of the elections, united around a pro-Western liberal platform (Formula News, 2024).

Several factors highlight the union’s strengths (Table 5). The Coalition for Change unites ideologically similar parties, targeting a specific voter segment, which could help attract loyal supporters. The first candidate on the electoral list is Nana Malashkhia, a civil servant with extensive public sector experience and one of the public faces of the demonstrations against the so-called anti-foreign agents legislation. Known as the “Woman with the EU flag against water cannons,” she had not previously been active in party politics (Civil.ge, 2024b). Her appearance as a new face and positive public perception could be crucial for undecided voters who are seeking fresh candidates. Her appearance as the one heading the electoral list is somewhat symbolic, given the upcoming parliamentary elections’ significance as a referendum on the country’s European course, and this can be an advantage for the party. The list also includes other new faces, including young people, which may attract new voters. Furthermore, the coalition’s member parties are signatories of the president’s Georgian Charter (Civil.ge, 2024c), indicating their willingness to cooperate with other political parties. The gender-balanced list, with eight women in the top twenty, is another positive factor (RFE/RL, 2024a). However, only two female candidates are in the top ten of the list (Civil.ge, 2024b), which may garner additional criticism.

While Ahali has the potential to draw some traditional United National Movement party voters, the past association of some of its leaders with that party raises doubts among other voters, reducing trust in the union amid the current political polarization and ruling party’s campaigns. The decision of Nika Gvaramia, a former senior official of United National Movement, not to be on the party list may positively impact the coalition’s positioning (RFE/RL, 2024c). While the fact the coalition members are unified around a liberal platform – suggesting ideological stability – it remains to be seen how effectively it can reach a broader electorate in a short time.

Table 5: Advantages and Weaknesses of COALITION FOR CHANGE

Historical stability	Ideological stability.	Negative attitudes among part of the voters towards some of the party leaders.
Visual identity	A new visual identity with elements of the entities included in the union.	
Party composition	A diverse composition and a significant number of women and young people in the top twenty of the party electoral list.	Insufficient representation of women in the top ten of the party list. Leaders associated with the previous government leading the party list.
Resources	Use of social media and creative forms of communication.	
Pre-election content	Declared pro-European and pro-democratic platform, as well as common liberal platform.	A liberal platform may, however, only be attractive to a small segment of the electorate.
Inter-political dynamics	The coalition is united around a common ideological platform, and the balance between its member parties is more or less preserved.	
International relations	Member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE Party).	

Source: material processed by the authors

Conclusion: Who and What Will Georgia Choose in 2024?

The upcoming parliamentary elections are seen as a pivotal moment for determining Georgia's foreign and internal policies, heightening the importance of electoral choices for Georgian voters. While the pre-election campaign appears unusually calm for Georgian political culture, it might as well be the calm before the storm. The 2024 parliamentary elections are of paramount importance for Georgia's future, with the outcomes potentially having profound implications for the nation's trajectory. In this context, electoral subjects are at the forefront of the fight for Georgia's European future.

In order for political parties to successfully take on this fundamental role, voters must express their trust in political entities and record this trust at the ballot boxes. Until now, Georgian voters had to choose between two major forces: Georgian Dream and United National Movement. However, recent surveys among the Georgian public indicate a strong preference for cross-party cooperation and coalition governments. Voters now have the opportunity to choose from several major political centers based on their ideological or rational preferences. In-depth analyses of the strengths and potential risks of the electoral subjects should lay the groundwork for creating such a link between voters and political entities, which has never been as important as for the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections.

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