



From Elections to Elections: Transformation of the Georgian Ruling Political Party “Georgian Dream”

Salome Kandelaki ¹

In the last decade, Georgia has firmly maintained its place among countries with hybrid democracies and is therefore characterized by an unstable political system. Political parties find it difficult to maintain ideological stability and often change their priorities depending on the context and needs. One of the clear examples of this is the radical ideological transformation of the ruling party - *Georgian Dream*. Specifically, *Georgian Dream* has dramatically changed its political agenda from a focus on social issues and EU integration policies to a policy of strengthening conservative narratives and intimidation (Radio Liberty 2024a). This change has been reflected in the appropriation of the narratives of the so-called conservative and ultra-nationalist movements and the placing of their political agendas at the core of the election campaign (On.ge 2024).

Building a pre-election campaign on negative messages and targeting opponents is not new for *Georgian Dream*, however, the 2024 election campaign is distinguished by the use of unprecedented methods of creating fear in society. This fear is based on the paradigm of war and peace, with *Georgian Dream* trying to present itself as the only guarantee of peace in the country. *Georgian Dream* accused a large part of the opposition of trying to drag the country into war and labelled it as a "collective National Movement", abolition of which is one of their main post-election goals (კუჩუკელი 2024). Since 2022, *Georgian Dream* has been

¹ Salome Kandelaki is policy analyst and project manager at Georgian Institute of Politics.

constantly instrumentalizing the topic of war and peace in politics (Kakachia & Kandelaki 2023). However, in the run up to the 2024 elections, the rapid change of the discourse in the *Georgian dream* has become particularly striking.

Public priorities vs the promises of the Georgian dream

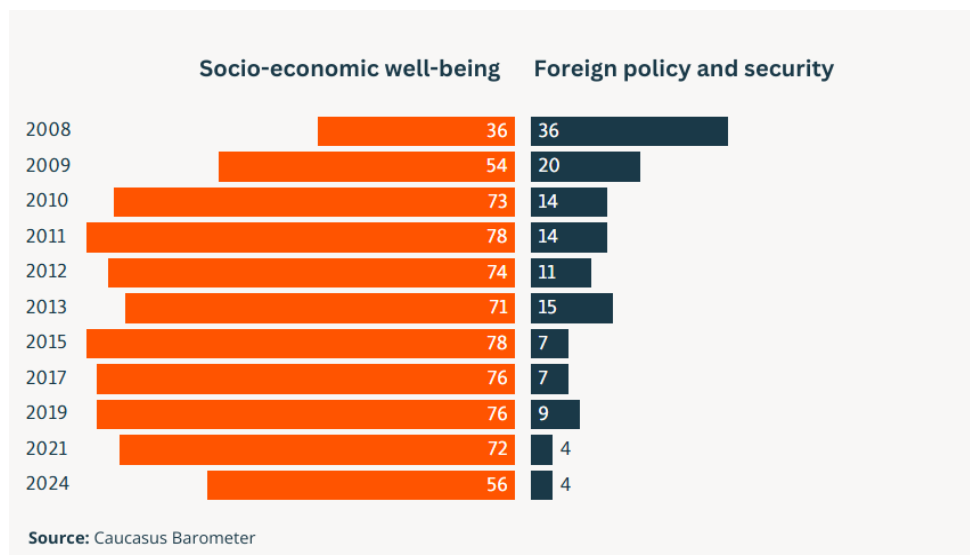
Table 1. The pre-election promises of Georgian Dream for 2020 vs 2024

Source 1: Chichua, N. 2020. What does the "Dream" promise to the voter | Elections 2020. Netgazeti. Available: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/492894/>

Contrary to the main pre-election promises of 2020, which were related to the creation of jobs, improvement in the economy and European integration, *Georgian Dream*, has been in 2024 limited mainly to promises of retaliation against the opposition, the introduction of homophobic legislation and the beginning of preparations for the restoration of territorial integrity (Kunchulia 2024). As a result of party leaders' harsh rhetoric towards their Western partners and the adoption of legislation that contradicts EU integration, the motto of the *Georgian Dream* "to Europe with dignity" has become less convincing for a section of pro-European voters. Although, formally, *Georgian Dream* has a detailed pre-election program, discourse-wise the party chose not to concentrate on challenges, but to influence the public's emotions. To determine the rationality of the election tactics of *Georgian Dream*, the main needs and challenges of the population of Georgia are analyzed below.

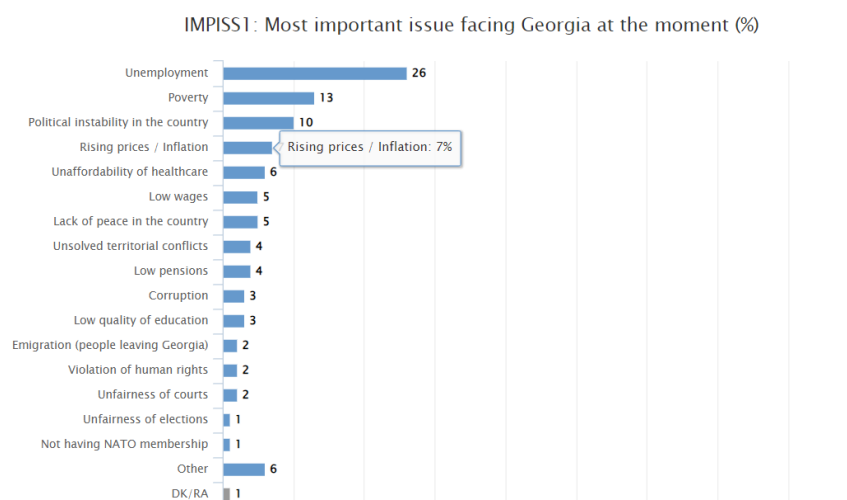
It is worth noting that according to the results of a public survey conducted by the Caucasus Barometer, the importance of foreign policy and security has decreased dramatically from 2008 to 2024, and according to the data of 2024, only 4% of the population of Georgia perceives this topic as the main challenge. Social and economic hardship has always been a very urgent problem (Diagram 1) and in recent years it is mentioned as the main challenge (Diagram 2). Against the backdrop of such data, it is worth noting that in the period leading up to elections, *Georgian Dream* does not focus on such topics at all, which is likely to have an influence on the electoral support.

Diagram 1: Indicator of the perception of foreign and security policy and socio-economic hardships as a challenge by the population of Georgia between 2008 to 2024.



Source: არაბული, ნ. 2024. მოსახლეობის დაკვეთა და „ქართული ოცნების“ საარჩევნო დაპირებები - რას აჩვენებს კვლევები [Societal demands and election promises of "Georgian Dream" - what the studies show. Radio Freedom]. Available: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/%E> Original source: Caucasus Barometer <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/datasets/>

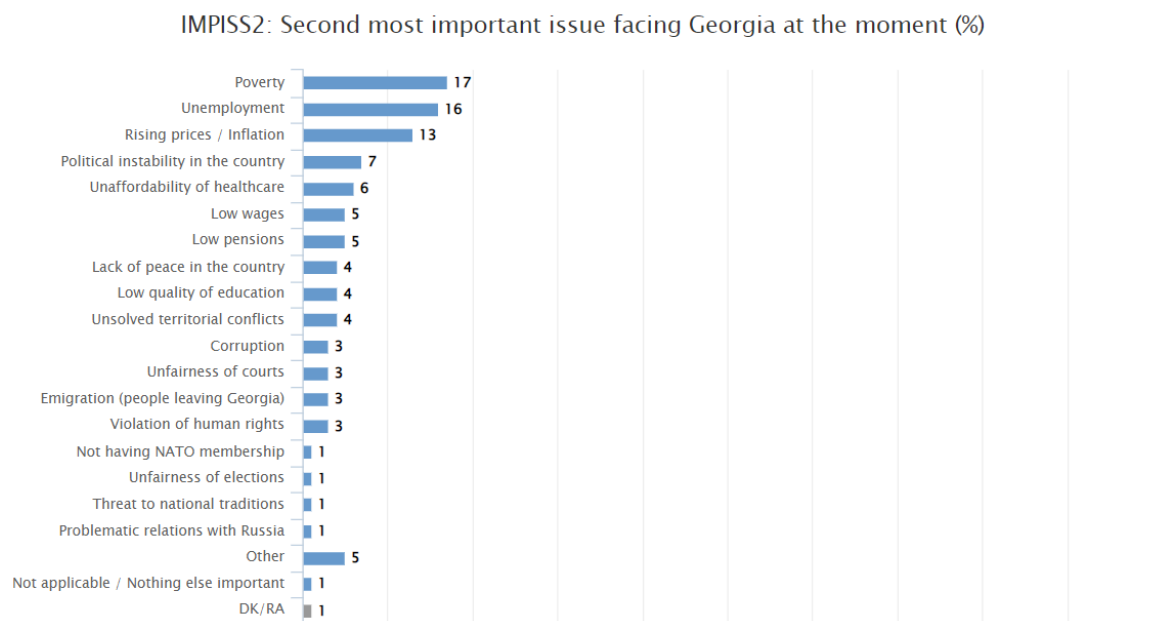
Diagram 2. List of the main challenges of the country according to the public survey



Source: Caucasus Barometer. 2024. Georgia, 2024 April 16 - May 13 data. Available: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/cb2024ge/IMPISS1/>

Georgian Dream actualized the topic of war in the country itself by instilling fear in the society about the start of war. Therefore, it can be assumed that this time, instead of practical political promises, the ruling party based its so-called pragmatic policy mainly on fear and on playing on emotions. First of all, this was most clearly expressed in the pre-election banners of *Georgian Dream*, where on one side there are Georgian churches, gardens and other buildings where everything is in order, and on the other side there are similar buildings and structures that were bombed and destroyed in Ukraine, causing mixed reactions in the society (Radio Liberty 2024b). The tactic of juxtaposing the Western values of the ruling party with the Georgian traditions and inciting the fear of losing the Georgian identity in the conservative society is also based on emotional factors. Accordingly, a rational explanation of the radical transformation of the ruling party was so difficult that the ruling party decided the manipulation of voters' emotions would be the most logical and effective tactic. However, on the one hand, it should be emphasized that as shown in a public survey, even among the second most important problems in the country, only 1% consider "the threat of losing national traditions" to be real (diagram 3). Although, it should be noted that as a result of the same survey, religion is named as an important factor in the daily life of 93% of the population of Georgia (Caucasus Barometer 2024b). Therefore, the ruling party realizes the very important role religion and traditions have in the life of the Georgian population. Thus, it is possible that just like scaring people with the theme of war, instilling the fear of losing traditions and religious values in the population is also an artificially created narrative. As the results of the survey revealed, society does not perceive the threat of losing traditions and religion as a challenge. But if the issue is politically instrumentalized and presented as a threat in a negative way, the ruling party expects that the society will react to these topics, which will help grow their electoral.

Figure 3: List of the country's second-ranked challenges according to the public survey



Source: Caucasus Barometer(a). 2024. Georgia, 2024 April 16 - May 13 data. Available:

<https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/IMPISS2/>

The roots and tactics of the discursive transformation of Georgian Dream

The absolute majority of the population of Georgia, including a large part of *Georgian Dream* voters, has always supported the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. Therefore, in order to maintain the pro-Western electorate, *Georgian Dream* had to apply for EU membership candidate status, following in the footsteps of Ukraine and Moldova. However, in 2023-24, the attitude of the *Georgian Dream* towards the Western partners has changed dramatically, causing the European Union to suspend the accession negotiations. This made the loss of the pro-Western part of electorate inevitable. Therefore, in order to maintain the votes of the voters on the one hand, *Georgian Dream* needed to strengthen the already developed thesis of war and peace. But on the other hand, in order to replace electoral support that it has lost, it needs to grow its following among the conservative section of the public. To do this *Georgian Dream* began to spread the pseudo-conservative-religious discourse in its pre-election efforts. The alleged weakening of the support for *Georgian Dream* by conservative-religious

voters goes back to 2014. This was the period when the Georgian Parliament adopted an anti-discrimination law as one of the prerequisites for visa liberalization with the European Union. The Catholic Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II openly opposed the adoption of this law. The patriarchy was against such clauses as elimination of discrimination based on "sexual orientation" and "gender identity". From the point of view of the Patriarch, this meant legalizing crime (Netgazeti 2014). *Georgian Dream* was probably aware that the support of the Orthodox Church congregation and part of the conservative population would weaken. Therefore, the ruling party tried to fill this void in various ways.

The first possible situational ally

One of the main situational allies of *Georgian Dream* in mobilizing the conservative electorate may have been the party *Alliance of Patriots*. Along with social issues, this party called for the preservation of national identity and traditions (Kandelaki 2021). Despite the fact that there was no formal union between the two parties mentioned above, they cooperated with each other at critical moments, especially in the second half of the Parliament of the 9th convocation of Georgia (2016-2020). Moreover, according to Irma Inashvili, one of the leaders of *Alliance of Patriots* in 2012, the distribution of prison footage took place within the framework of the journalistic investigation by "Obiektivi TV" (Netgazeti 2012), and this led to the coming to power of *Georgian Dream*. The ties with the ruling party of the *Alliance of Patriots* were manifested even when President Salome Zurbishvili participated in the elections with the support of *Georgian Dream* and when the *Alliance of Patriots* held large-scale rallies against the National Movement and in support of Salome Zurbishvili's candidacy in the second round (Civil Georgia 2018a). In addition, before the 2020 parliamentary elections, social network groups were identified on Facebook simultaneously supporting *Georgian Dream* and the *Alliance of Patriots* (ISFED 2020). It is also significant that official meetings held by the *Alliance of Patriots* in the State Council of Russia in 2016 did not cause a strong response from *Georgian Dream* (Civil Georgia 2017). At the same time, it should be noted that Irma Inashvili also held the position of the Vice Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia (*Alliance of Patriots* 2017).

In 2018, the MPs from the *Alliance of Patriots* submitted a bill for "insulting religious feelings" to the parliament and came up with the initiative of imposing criminal liabilities. The bill was supported in principle by *Georgian Dream* (Civil Georgia 2018b). In addition, in the spring of 2019, Georgian society was hugely disturbed when the movement of clergy and citizens was restricted over the entire territory of the Davit Gareji monastery complex (Radio

Liberty 2019). In response, the *Alliance of Patriots* held rallies in Gareji and Tbilisi, and finally the issue was crowned with the then Prime Minister Gakharia's visit to Azerbaijan and the settlement of the issue - a good tactical move to gain the favor of the voters before the elections (Samkharadze 2020). According to expert Paata Zakareishvili, the development of new message boxes with the theme of war and peace, as well as with the motive of protecting religious monuments and feelings in 2024, is a repetition of the same theme of "Davit Gareji is Georgia" (On.ge 2024), and is a tested *Georgian Dream* tactic. Despite crossing the threshold in the 2020 elections, the leaders of the *Alliance of Patriots* did not recognize the results of it and said they were falsified. Similarly, to a large part of the opposition they announced a parliamentary boycott (IPN 2020). If we look at the history of the relationship between the ruling party and the *Alliance of Patriots* and the events that developed after the 2020 elections, it can be assumed that *Georgian Dream* tactically brought them close and then sidelined them.

The first possible indirect ally

To attract the social-conservative electorate, the second indirect ally of *Georgian Dream*, could have been *Alt-Info*. Especially if we take into account that the government has never reacted to violent acts and ties with Russia by *Alt-info* representatives. *Alt-Info* is characterized by ultra-nationalist and pro-Russian rhetoric, and uses religion and traditions to spread its narrative to certain groups of society with more or less success. Several reports have been written on the connection between the two forces, one of which is by the Governance Monitoring Center (GMC), whose representatives revealed the financial ties of the *Conservative Movement* of *Alt-Info* to both Russia and the Georgian government. They also revealed that one of the *Alt-Info* office premises was opened in a building owned by the son of a *Georgian Dream* council member, and that during the municipal elections a representative of the *Conservative Movement* withdrew his candidacy in favor of *Georgian Dream* in one of the regions (ISFED 2022).

In addition, Mamuka Mdinardze, one of the current leaders of the *Georgian Dream*, was a lawyer for Konstantine Morgoshia, one of the leaders of the *Conservative Movement* when he was charged with embezzlement and fraud (GMC 2022, Democracy Research 2022). Konstantine Morgoshia has not paid the fine of over a hundred thousand imposed by the Tbilisi City Court for years. Margoshia donated 96,600 GEL to the *Alliance of Patriots* in 2016, bypassing the law on party financing, and despite the violation he has still not paid the fine.. It is worth noting that *Georgian Dream* did not mention *Alt-Info* in its election promise while

talking about banning the opposition, despite the fact that this movement is directly connected with Russia and its members have visited Moscow several times since the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Kinch 2022).

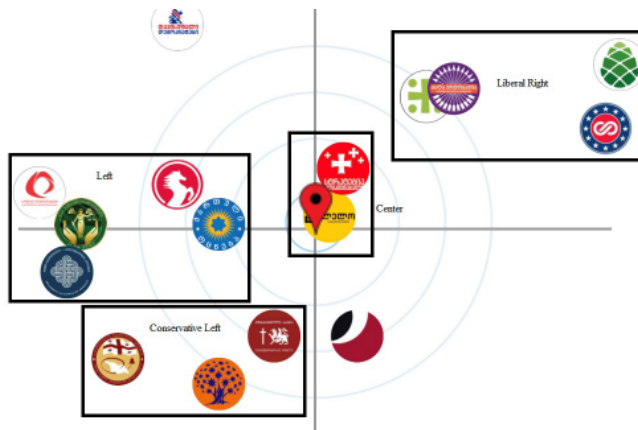
There is an interesting coincidence between the content of the draft law initiated by *Alt-Info* in Parliament in 2022 and the homophobic legislation already adopted by *Georgian Dream* in September 2024, especially in terms of limiting gatherings and demonstrations. The law adopted by *Georgian Dream* in September 2024 coincides with the previous initiative of *Alt-Info*, in particular, after the legislative changes, it becomes inadmissible to "publicly hold such a gathering and/or demonstration that is aimed at popularization of assigning a person to a sex different from his biological sex, of sexual orientation-connected relationship between the same biological sex persons or incest." (Radio Liberty 2024g). Non-governmental organizations claim that "the package in its essence refers not only to one group, the LGBTQ community, but also creates a precedent that in the future the government can deprive any citizen of the rights guaranteed by the constitution (Civil Georgia 2024).

Despite its loyalty towards *Alt-Info*, at the beginning of 2024 the *Georgian Dream* first brought to the election arena People's Power - a political branch affiliated to itself (Kunchulia 2024). Then the public registry cancelled the *Alt-Info Conservative Movement* due to defects in the registration of the party (Publica 2024). According to the leaders of *Alt-Info*, People's Power appropriated their topics and messages and set a goal to replace them before the elections" (Kunchulia 2024). In the end, *Georgian Dream* realized that it would not be profitable if the People's Power Party competed separately in the elections and formed a unified electoral list (Radio Freedom 2024d). *Alt-Info* joined *Alliance of Patriots* party in the parliamentary elections.

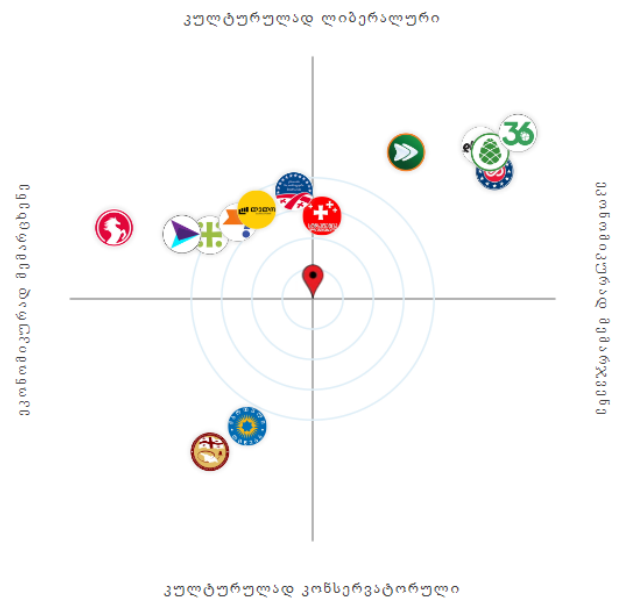
However, *Georgian Dream* has completely appropriated the political discourse of the *Alliance of Patriots* and *Alt-Info*, which is clear from the 2024 election compass. On the compass, *Georgian Dream* and the *Alliance of Patriots* are placed side by side on the same plane in left-wing conservative positions, which is very different from the data of the 2021 election compass, where it used to take centrist and in some cases, liberal positions (see Compass 1 and Compass 2). Zurab Makharadze, one of the leaders of *Alt-Info*, claims the same thing, according to whom *Georgian Dream* copied their message box (On.ge 2024).

Grada 1 & 2: political landscape of Georgia reflected on the electoral compass 2021 and 2024

Compass 1. Political compass 2021



Compass 2. Political compass 2024



Source 1: Kakhishvili L, Keshelava D., 2021. Political Landscape of Georgia. Friedrich Ebert Fund. Available: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/18418-20220419.pdf>

Source 2: ISET. 2024. Election compass. Georgia. EU, IRI, FES, KAS, USAID. Available: <https://bm.ge/news/dgheidan-akhali>

To what extent will the change in discourse be successful for the Georgian Dream?

In the parliamentary elections of 2024 the ruling party of Georgia, *Georgian Dream*, has been trying to mobilize the votes of the conservative population in addition to gaining the votes of its regular voters. Therefore, the party concentrates as much as possible on each vote and leaves no space for other far-right-nationalist or openly conservative political parties.

However, if we look at *Georgian Dream's* strategy over the years, it has never given up conservative voters to other political forces. *Georgian Dream* has always tried to gain control over such movements or parties that aimed to attract this segment of voters. In particular,

such was the *Alliance of Patriots, Alt-Info*. Then, it created its own conservative branch in the heart of *Georgian Dream* in the form of People's Power and tried to present it as an independent player. It went on to merge with it at the right time. If the tactic of *Georgian Dream* is to leave the *Alliance of Patriots* and *Alt-Info* out of the game and win over their electorate entirely, then it will be quite difficult for them, because over the years these political actors have formed a small but stable electorate. Supposing that tactic of *Georgian Dream* is to bring these forces into the Parliament and form a coalition with them later. In that case, the situation is dire too, because according to all public polls including GORBI studies, the *Alliance of Patriots* and *Alt-Info* together do not have the potential to overcome the 5% electoral threshold.

Therefore, in addition to the conservative message box and trying to harmonize as much as possible with the Orthodox Church, *Georgian Dream* is trying to influence the mood of the population with the theme of war and peace, and doing so more or less successfully, too, due to traumatic memories of war from the past. However, it should be taken into account that the largest part of the population chooses prosperity along with peace in the country. Socio-economic challenges are the main challenge to them and they see salvation in integration into the European Union, the chances of which are suspended due to the authoritarian policy of *Georgian Dream*. Therefore, if the population of Georgia chooses the European perspective, then the electoral support of *Georgian Dream* will weaken. But if the population of Georgia makes a choice out of fear of war and loss of traditions, then the support for *Georgian dream* won't weaken much. However, the most important topics for the population, are social and economic welfare and the European future, and *Georgian Dream* has put its bet on the conservative and war and peace paradigm in the period leading up to the election. Thus, it can be said that the ruling party has gone 'all in' and most probably this has deprived them of the potential to win a majority in Parliament.

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13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12
Email: info@gip.ge
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