



Elections 2024: What is Georgian Dream's Dream for Georgia?

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The Georgian Dream (GD) party has ruled Georgia for 12 years. It is now battling to win a fourth term, an unusual scenario for the young Georgian democracy. The incumbent has shown increasing authoritarian tendencies, and its third term has been the most damaging for the country's democratic development and Western path. During the 2024 election period, GD's campaign has led to public discontent and anti-party mobilisation.

It has been increasingly difficult for GD to disguise its anti-Western and anti-democratic objectives despite its mask of people's power and pro-European, pro-democracy façade. Long-existing suspicions that GD Honorary Chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili's interests are dominant enhance these assumptions. The central figure of the party and informal rule, Ivanishvili has been known to exploit political processes to strengthen his influence and subject state interests to his own. He has a significant impact on GD's vision for the Georgian state and on international affairs.

Ivanishvili's party has been positioning itself as the sole defender of Georgian national interests, but with the country's democratic backsliding in recent years, it has had to adjust

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its views external and domestic politics. The war in Ukraine prompted GD and Ivanishvili to spin conspiracy theories, such as about a ‘Global War Party’ seeking to harm Georgia. More recently, they enacted a Russian-style law on foreign agents and vowed to create a one-party system if they won the 26 October 2024 parliamentary elections. To better assess GD’s vision of the future of Georgia, we analysed its ‘fearful’ policies, separating tangible interests from rhetoric by dissecting key GD public speeches and statements. The results are as generally expected: ever-increasing authoritarianism if Georgian Dream wins enough seats to form a government.

Analysis of Georgian Dream’s Narratives after April 2024

One of the watershed moments was the GD General Convention in late April 2024. The policy memo analyses speeches and statements starting with this event and finishing with a public letter October 1 by Ivanishvili to the US Embassy (Annex 1). The speeches and statements have been selected considering the scale of resonance on topics that have caused major unrest, as well as the ideas and visions with the most impact and influence to alter the current political state. A content analysis of the texts reveals that GD’s vision has three central dimensions that are connected to Georgia’s domestic political developments, foreign policy and supremacy of Ivanishvili: 1) pursue ‘Nuremberg Trials’ of Georgian opposition groups, thus creating a one-party state; 2) cultivate the geopolitics of war and peace; and 3) keep Ivanishvili’s financial interests sacred and him as both victim and messiah.

‘Nuremberg Trials’ of the Georgian Political Field

A statement released by GD on 20 August reads that the party aims to secure a constitutional majority and then ‘recover’ and ‘heal’ the political system (Georgian Dream 20 August). Such healing would be ‘impossible’ according to GD ‘without removing collective national movement from politics’ (Georgian Dream 20 August). The statement clarifies that ‘once a constitutional majority is secured, we will initiate necessary legal procedures leading to declare United National Movement and all its satellites or successors as unconstitutional’ (Georgian Dream 20 August). This was a formal promise made to voters, and many party officials replicated the statements, which called for the October elections to ‘turn into a type of Nuremberg political sentence for the United National Movement’ (Georgian Dream 20 August). It is noteworthy to mention that the terminology on the matter in April 2023 used by Irakli Kobakhidze, who became prime minister in February 2024, indicates that the

pledge was not a spontaneous reaction to the party's pre-election challenges (Mtavari Arkhi 2023).

The calling for Nuremberg-style political trials by GD against political opponents was a narrative that resonated negatively. This has two underlying reasons. First, the United National Movement (UNM), the current major opposition party, still connected to Mikheil Saakashvili, has had one of the largest electorates among opposition parties. If it secures a constitutional majority, GD has said it will dissolve the party and seek criminal convictions of members as a 'treasonous group' (Ivanishvili 29 April). According to Ivanishvili (29 April, 16 July), in 2012, GD 'didn't have any resources to punish National Movement' but was sure that the party 'would never attempt to return to power but it turned out later that they have deep roots.' It seems that GD has not been able to cope with its major competitor, UNM, which has had governmental experience and remains a systemic challenger of the current ruling party. At the same time, in a 2023 survey, UNM was noted as the least popular out of all parties (IRI 2023), which gave GD the motivation to use the UNM's name as a label for all opposition and under the cause of eliminating the collective UNM to clear the political field.

The idea of clearing the political field through post-election 'Nuremberg Trials' is dangerous for any democracy. Based on UNM's low public popularity last year, GD has been trying to connect any critical political entity or person to it. Per Kobakhidze (23 August), 'It's not interesting [who will enter the parliament], because within the next period, UNM and its satellites or successors will be convicted, it doesn't matter either if they enter the parliament or not, they can't escape conviction'. To Kobakhidze and his partners, the entire opposition spectrum will be part of the 'Nuremberg process', thereby ensuring that voters will have no choices in coming years. GD has underscored that it is impossible to establish a 'healthy democratic system' where 'better political powers should be alternating each other in government' and a 'flawless election will only be held when UNM is substituted by healthy opposition powers' (Kobakhidze, 23 August). If GD manages to launch this process, it will certainly lead to single-party consolidated authoritarianism.

In addition to declaring future convictions for the political opposition, GD has harassed civil society, complaining that people and groups are enemies of the state and under foreign influence. They like to mention 'internal enemies', 'agents' and 'agentocracy' in their campaign. For instance, Kobakhidze (23 August, 15 September) stated that the opposition are 'foreign agents that always aim for war and unrest in the country' and has blamed the 'radical opposition' for its 'constant hostility towards the state'. A GD statement in August

directly warned voters that had they voted for the opposition in 2020-21, Georgia would be in far worse condition today than Ukraine. According to the full narrative, it would be the passive and opposition voters who would be responsible if Russia launches a full-scale war on Georgia, as it had in Ukraine. Such an attack on the electorate indicates that GD's narratives and political behaviour will worsen if it has the opportunity to execute its authoritarian visions. Therefore, political repressions seem inevitable if they maintain power.

Thus, GD's 'healthy democracy' will only be built when it secures a constitutional majority and then constitutionally prohibits the opposition. After this, the idea of the UNM as an 'ideology of blood' should be prosecuted - 'Nuremberg Trials' in Georgian - which will cover 'networks of foreign agents' or civil society organizations. Finally, there will be a time for each voter, who by voting for the opposition contributed too dragging Georgia into a war, to take their share of responsibility. Accordingly, 'Nuremberg Trials' will be the foundation, without which Georgia's 'irreversible development' (Ivanishvili, 16 July) and 'bright, European future' (Kobakhidze 23 August) will not be possible. GD's this vision is a manifestation of classic authoritarianism, where there is no playing field for political competition, political and civic opposition is constitutionally banned, and voters live under the constant fear of political repressions.

Georgian Dream's Geopolitics: Between War and Peace

GD's fierce confrontation with the West was a result of mainly the ambiguous position of Tbilisi after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This was coupled with condemnations of the West and Ukraine by Tbilisi, and disinformation campaigns demonising the West due to the criticism of GD for democratic backsliding. GD put significant efforts to neutralize the damaging effects to the party caused by the constructive criticism from the West. GD invented mystical forces that threaten peace in Georgia; an image of 'undignified Europe'; confronted the US; and deepened cooperation with illiberal forces. In parallel, GD avoids criticism of Russia and blames Georgia for the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the August War in 2008.

Overall, to justify all these, GD offers its voters a geopolitical reality, in which mystical 'global war party representatives' are defeated or GD 'deals' with them (RFE/RL 2024d). Party officials don't exactly mention who 'global war party' is (most probably, they mean

liberal elites in Europe and US) (Pertaia 2024). Though, they say that this group aims to force Georgia enter war in Ukraine and open the second front – as Ivanishvili mentions ‘Global War Party is aggressive towards Georgia because it couldn’t turn Georgia into the second front despite significant efforts, that is easily attainable if agents return to power’ (Ivanishvili, 29 April). In GD’s wishful scenario, Donald Trump wins the US presidential election, while in the European Union ‘noble patriots’ come to power (Ivanishvili, 16 July). The party has no control over these developments and only external political processes determine whether this wishful thinking comes true.

GD hold the belief that after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the world order is becoming more multipolar, and the West, which supports Ukraine, is growing weaker, losing its influence globally, especially in the global south. Due to these systemic shifts, the party does not anticipate Ukraine’s victory. On the contrary, it seems GD believes that once Moscow regains control over the post-soviet states, Russia will become one of the central poles of the world politics and a regional hegemon. Thus, Georgia, as a weak state will have to accept the ‘new reality’ and adjust to the new regional order created by Vladimir Putin’s Russia. At the same time, under these new conditions, Georgia will need to think about implementation of its national interests, such as restoring territorial integrity, on any Kremlin terms e.g., by creating a confederation. Henceforth, GD’s best scenario would be to declare the country neutral to remove Georgia as a ‘factor among the list of conflicting issues between the West and Russia’ (Civil.ge 2013). Critics contend that this would ultimately serve Georgia’s integration into Russian-dominated structures in post-Soviet space and beyond (e.g., CIS, Eurasian Economic Union, BRICS). However, there might be another interpretation. GD generally sees severe competition among great powers (US, EU, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey) in South Caucasus as a temptation to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy until the geopolitical uncertainty is settled. This would be supported by domestic political situation and peculiarities of the regime leaning towards authoritarianism. The essence of this policy is for the ruling elite to maintain power for an unlimited period and minimise the government’s economic and political dependence on the West.

The GD elite also hope that Donald Trump will win the US Presidential elections (Ivanishvili 16 July). Their geopolitical calculation assumes that Trump is an isolationist and opposes the expansion of democracy globally. He will, therefore, pay less attention to Georgia and try find a common ground with Russia and China. Unlike the Biden administration, GD expects Trump to provide less resources to Ukraine. In Europe, on the other hand, GD has been forging deeper ties with Viktor Orbán’s government and right-wing Eurosceptic groups (e.g., European Patriots) whom they consider role models. GD relies on these right-wing

groups to block undesirable EU decisions in areas such as sanctions against the GD government or visa liberalisation (Vinklerova 2024).

The Sacralisation of Bidzina Ivanishvili: A Wealthy Messiah and A Victim

Uncertainty between Georgia and its traditional allies is significantly related to Bidzina Ivanishvili's financial disputes with Credit Swiss in international courts. Interestingly, these disputes became such important topics that they gradually elevated as parts of anti-western information campaigns.

Ivanishvili has been involved in public policy at various stages during the rule of GD since 2012. Party ratings went down during the current third term while societal dissatisfaction increased, prompting his active return. His status as Honorary Chairman of the party does not grant him any official governmental position or accountability. Meanwhile, all the nominal party leaders – Irakli Gharibashvili, Shalva Papuashvili, Kakha Kaladze, Mamuka Mdinardze, Irakli Kobakhidze – constantly convey their gratitude towards Ivanishvili.

The party suggests a strong rhetoric of heroisation and sacralisation of Ivanishvili. On the one hand, he is the national hero; on the other hand, he is a victim of global powers. This combination circulates with various formulations, though one of the most comprehensive summaries belongs to Kaladze, mayor of Tbilisi since 2017, who said, 'I want to express special gratitude towards Mr Bidzina Ivanishvili, who since 2012, has made Georgia's national interests a cornerstone principle of the government's work. Despite the massive pressure and attacks, we managed to maintain our principled position and peace in the country' (Kaladze, 29 April). It's interesting to observe that nearly all speeches and statements, analysed for the purposes of our research, involve an address of gratitude towards the Honorary Chair. Former Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili said (16 July), '...there is the person [Ivanishvili] with us who played a vital role and mission in the history of Georgia. During the darkest of times, times of total hopelessness and lack of perspective, during the dictatorship and oppressive regime, he managed to unite a strong team for a common purpose and saved Georgia' (Gharibashvili, 16 July). Current Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze also greeted to Honorary Chair: "Gratitude to Mr Bidzina Ivanishvili that Georgia now has peace, economic growth and we became candidate country" (Kobakhidze, 29 April).

When necessary, Ivanishvili readily accepts praise and presents himself as the central figure, the leading and unequivocal defender of Georgian identity and dignity. ‘The right move at the right time is the main art of politics. My political past allows me to claim that as a political leader, I can calculate these moves well’, he said (29 April).

Traditionally, Ivanishvili was in the shadows. Thus, the intensive sacralisation of his persona lately can be explained by the assumption that his party and power-related interests are being challenged, and his finances have been jeopardised. Ivanishvili himself has become active following his personal financial dispute with Credit Suisse (RFE/RL 2024b). This dispute spilled into geopolitical confrontation and reached its peak in early October when Ivanishvili sent his letter to the US Embassy. He wrote that he refuses to meet with American politicians ‘until the end of financial blackmail’ stemming from the ‘high influence of the Global War Party’ (Ivanishvili, October 1). The letter seems to have been in response to a US Embassy social media post saying, ‘Bidzina Ivanishvili knows that the money related to Credit Suisse is in the hands of the courts in Bermuda and Singapore, not the US. Why is he telling Georgians a different story?’ (USA in Georgia 2024). Already, several sizeable anti-Western sentiments had come out in May 2024 when Speaker Shalva Papuashvili turned down meetings with European leaders on their trip to Georgia, and when Ivanishvili declined to meet U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Jim O’Brien, ostensibly due to ‘sanctions’ on Ivanishvili (RFE/RL 2024c). Evidently, decision to cut official political relations with Washington has already been made long ago.

Upholding his part in defending Mayor Kaladze periodically claims that international courts ‘blackmail Bidzina Ivanishvili with the country’s fate’ (Bm.ge 2024). He even closed all his European bank accounts (worth millions), explaining that he no longer trusts them because they ‘looted’ Ivanishvili (Netgazeti 2024). Prime Minister Kobakhidze sees ‘political interests’ in the Credit Suisse case and suspects that the ‘reason for stopping [Ivanishvili’s] finances are GD’s peaceful politics’ (1TV.ge 2022, Rustavi 2 2023).

From the Secretary of State, O’Brien remarked, ‘the fact that the person refused to meet with the partner of the country means that he puts his interests above his obligation. For such an influential individual to be that badly misinformed is shocking and disappointing’ (RFE/RL 2024a). Ivanishvili positions himself as the main defender of the national interest but sacrifices political relations with the country’s most powerful strategic partner. This will leave the country without powerful friend amidst rapidly-changing geopolitical environment and exposes it to the threats that have been expanding and transforming during the last few years.

Conclusion: How Will Georgian Dream's Georgia look?

Since the initiation of 'the Russian Law' on foreign agents in April 2024, GD's lean toward authoritarianism has become irreversible. The party seeks the consolidation of an authoritarian regime and a single-party system, detaching from the European integration processes. The party's ambitions have three dimensions. In domestic politics, they would clear the field and hamper civil society. Geopolitically, they would seek rapprochement with authoritarian regimes (to gain fragile support). In the personal dimension, Ivanishvili's financial and power-related interests would be secured. Following these circumstances, Georgia's national interests—its democratic future and security—would be forfeited for narrow party and personal oligarchy interests.

If GD has the opportunity to implement these promises, Georgia's future will be damaged. GD's open narrative about holding 'Nuremberg Trials' eliminates any sign of democratic governance. Their authoritarianism will feature single-party rule, oppression of political opponents, state-controlled media, weakened civil society and individual repressions of critical voters. Perhaps elections will still be held but without competition. Against this background, developing and deepening partnerships with Western democracies and, especially, membership in the Euro-Atlantic institutions will be practically impossible. Georgia's attractiveness in the West will diminish given that Georgia is not particularly rich with natural resources to attract sufficient economic interest for tolerating authoritarianism. Thus, criticism from Western democracies will be translated to domestic audiences as a fight for Georgian statehood. This will leave the country in the conditions where its situational partners are other authoritarian regimes oriented at maintaining power and survival. This means that Russian influence will rise. Tbilisi will have no way to resist Moscow's orders, devastating Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Regimes with similar interests and rhetoric will disguise Georgia's return to the Russian orbit as 'cooperation'.

Lastly, the Ivanishvili cult of personality will return to Georgia, signs of which are already apparent. The government would orient on securing a single person's status and wealth at all costs. Since Georgia is not rich with resources, Georgian authoritarianism will not receive its legitimation based on policies creating material welfare for large parts of the society. Instead, the source of legitimation will be mythology around the personality cult. Myths already circulate about the near-supernatural abilities of Ivanishvili, that he can calculate what will happen in the future and can handle any situation or attack—but these are

necessary because he lacks charisma and cannot influence the masses with his personal qualities. The mystification of his image will be one of the key assignments of GD, which has revealed through its narratives a hope for authoritarian Soviet-style rule based on myths and mystic enemies. The key difference is that the Soviet Union had resources to implement welfare policies. Yet, such 'traditions' of finding enemies of the state while fostering personality cults resulted in the Soviet Red Terror that still exists in the Georgian nation's memory as a collective trauma.

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Annex 1: Key Speeches and Statements Analysed

Speech/Statement	Date
Georgian Dream party convention	29.04.2024
Launch of election campaign and new central office	16.07.2024
Statement of the Political Council (objectives for a constitutional majority)	20.08.2024
Speech by Ivanishvili at the election campaign regional event in Mtskheta	21.08.2024
Presentation of delegates	23.08.2024
Election Campaign in Gori	14.09.2024
Ivanishvili 's letter to the US Embassy	01.10.2024



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
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