

Georgian Dream's Authoritarian Push Ahead of the Pivotal Elections



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On August 20, 2024, Georgian Dream (GD), the ruling party of Georgia, announced an anti-democratic, anti-liberal agenda for the upcoming October 26 elections. The party aims to secure a constitutional majority to pursue four key initiatives: banning political opposition, cracking down on "gay propaganda," revising the governance system, and enhancing the Georgian Orthodox Church's role in the constitution.

GD plans to outlaw major opposition parties accusing them of destabilizing the government. This message seems intended to intensify political polarization in Georgian society. Additionally, GD has adopted alarmingly anti-liberal legislation to restrict LGBTQ+ freedoms and rights and is pushing for constitutional amendment to enshrine so-called "traditional family values".

The party also proposes revising the governance system to address hypothetical scenarios of territorial restoration, a proposal that appears politically unfeasible and aimed at stoking nationalist sentiments. Furthermore, GD seeks to elevate the Orthodox Church's constitutional status, but this proposal has met resistance from the Church, due to concerns about losing power.

GD's campaign frames the election as a choice between stability and chaos, traditional values and moral decay, and sovereignty versus external dependence. GD's campaign rhetoric deepens polarization domestically, alienates Georgia's allies, and undermines the country's progress on its path to EU integration.

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On August 20, 2024, the ruling party Georgian Dream (GD) made a strikingly authoritarian [pledge](#) in the lead-up to the October 26 elections that astounded many observers of Georgian politics.

The party announced its aim to secure an unprecedented level of support to achieve a constitutional majority in the next parliament to be able to execute four key initiatives: ban the political opposition, crack down on “gay propaganda,” revise the country’s governance system and redefine the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the constitution.

The political and legal analysis of these promises reveals that they are rather manipulative and deceptive, significantly detached from the genuine [concerns](#) of the Georgian people. Unable to address them, GD employs nationalistic, pseudo-conservative, aggressive campaign rhetoric in an attempt to project an image of an enemy and mobilize its base against it. The ultimate goal appears to consolidate power and secure another term of governance.

Georgian Dream’s campaign centers around the [triad](#): peace, traditional values, and state sovereignty. It frames the upcoming elections as a choice between war and peace, moral decay and traditional values, and sovereignty versus external dependence. Essentially, the party positions itself as the defender of these values versus its opponents¹, which it accuses of undermining them.

Targeting the Political Opposition

In its August 20th [statement](#), Georgian Dream pledged to outlaw the political opposition, including the United National Movement (UNM) and its affiliated parties, as part of a plan to “substantially refresh” the political system. GD accuses them of seeking to destabilize Georgia’s current government and “open a second front” against Russia, following its invasion of Ukraine. The statement also reiterated GD’s [longstanding](#) accusation that the UNM is responsible for initiating the war in 2008. Thus, the ruling party frames this legal ban as a necessary measure, akin to a “Nuremberg process,” to deal with those who started the 2008 war and are currently challenging GD’s peaceful governance.

Following the statement, GD’s campaign leader and Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [outlined](#) a specific list of parties to be declared unconstitutional. This list effectively targets the entire spectrum of the opposition. GD’s plan also includes stripping these parties of their parliamentary mandates, paving the way for a one-party rule in the 11th convocation of parliament.

According to the Georgian Constitution, only the Constitutional Court can outlaw political parties. [Article 60](#) specifies that the court can review a party’s constitutionality based on a claim from the President, the Government, or at least one-fifth (30) of the Members of Parliament. Georgian Dream could gather a sufficient number of

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¹ Often referred to as the “Collective UNM,” (United National Movement), which is an umbrella term for anyone who opposes GD

MPs to initiate such a review. The [grounds](#) for outlawing a political party are detailed in the law on Political Associations of Citizens.

Thus, GD's promise to ban opposition parties and particularly the UNM, if it secures a constitutional majority seems more like a propaganda piece to deepen the polarization, rather than a concrete plan. If GD were serious about this promise, it could have initiated legal proceedings under the current framework.

Ban on LGBT Propaganda

Georgian Dream's second promise involves seeking a constitutional majority to adopt a draft amendment to Article 30 of the Georgian Constitution. It aims to enshrine so-called family values and, allegedly, the protection of minors at the highest constitutional level. GD [argues](#) that this measure is necessary to combat what it perceives as a dangerous spread of "pseudo-liberal ideology", which it claims threatens to undermine human dignity, morals, and identity. To test the viability of this position and gauge public support, GD [conducted](#) discussions in six regions of Georgia before officially launching its election campaign.

Due to an insufficient number of votes to pass the constitutional amendment, GD also [introduced](#) and [adopted](#) a legislative package on "Protecting Family Values and Minors", which includes 18 amendments to various laws. Adoption of this package essentially implements GD's August 20 statement [promises](#): banning same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, banning gender transition surgery, and restricting the promotion of "pseudo-liberal ideology" in educational institutions and mass media, effectively censoring LGBTQ+ issues.

The adoption of this legislation is [detrimental](#) to Georgian society in two key ways. First, it diverts public attention from pressing issues to controversial topics that do not reflect the core concerns of Georgian society. At the same time, the legislation enacts censorship and severely infringes upon freedom of expression and the right to assembly. By enacting this law, GD effectively legitimizes the suppression of LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms. This move can be seen as a strategic attempt to leverage an illiberal political agenda to galvanize conservative voters by pushing for a constitutional mandate.

Revision of the Governance System

The third promise in the August 20 [statement](#) pertains to the theoretical scenario of peacefully restoring Georgia's territorial integrity. Given the volatile security situation in the region, GD argues that the opportunity for reintegration could arise at any time. If so, a constitutional amendment will be necessary to align the system of governance and the territorial arrangement with the new reality. These sentiments have not been well received in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. Governments of the occupied territories [rejected](#) any ongoing negotiations or potential for integration in the foreseeable future.

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[Article 37](#) in the Constitution of Georgia provides that, following the full restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity, the parliament will be restructured into two chambers: the Council and the Senate. The Council will be composed of members elected through proportional representation, while the Senate will include members elected from the Autonomous Republics of Abkhazia and Adjara and other territorial units. This new bicameral parliament will have the authority to revise the state's territorial arrangement, adhering to the principle of separation of powers (Article 7).

In essence, the current constitutional provisions aim to ensure that after the full restoration of territorial integrity, representatives from Abkhazia and South Ossetia are elected to the new bicameral parliament, and their interests are adequately represented in any revisions of territorial arrangements of the country. Thus, GD's push for a constitutional majority to preemptively decide these issues contradicts the spirit of the existing constitutional norms and seems politically unfeasible for this moment. However, experts assess it effectively aligns with GD's objective to sow nationalist sentiments and divert public attention from pressing issues to hypothetical scenarios.

Having the same goal in mind, on September 14, during the campaign rally in Gori, near the Russian occupation line, Bidzina Ivanishvili [blamed](#) the previous Georgian government for launching an attack on the South Ossetia. He added that while those responsible will face legal consequences, people will find inner strength to [apologize](#) to Ossetians for putting them up in flames. However, this initiative for "reconciliation" [backfired](#), provoking public outrage for neglecting Russia's responsibility for military invasion and occupation, which continues to this day.

Constitutional Status of Georgia's Orthodox Church

The fourth reason for seeking a constitutional majority was relatively cryptic. The [statement](#) regarding this promised asserted that said promise is crucial for safeguarding Georgia's statehood, identity and national values, and will be publicised when negotiations are completed. It has since become clear that the party aims to strengthen the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church at the constitutional level. Bidzina Ivanishvili's recent [address](#) at a campaign event in Akhaltsikhe confirmed the party's intent.

However, the Georgian Dream's ambitions were bigger than initially claimed. The representative of the patriarchate [disclosed](#) that the ruling party proposed declaring Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, aiming at elevating the role of the Church in the Constitution. Although the patriarchate finds the latter generally acceptable, it did not think the same regarding declaring Orthodox Christianity as the state religion.

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The Church's reluctance to accept the proposal is influenced by its already privileged position under the 2002 Constitutional Agreement with the state, known as the "Concordat." This agreement provides the Church with numerous benefits, "including legal immunity for the Patriarch, various tax exemptions, preferential conditions for acquiring state property, restitution and preservation of religious sites considered national cultural heritage, state recognition of degrees from religious institutions, and compensation for damages suffered during the Soviet era." Declaring Orthodox Christianity as the state religion could lead to demands for financial transparency and greater state involvement in clerical appointments and other church affairs. Such changes could introduce new rules that do not necessarily provide additional benefits, making the Church cautious about accepting the GD's proposal. Irrespective of what GD's real intentions were about the Orthodox Church, the party manipulated the religious sentiments of the majority of Georgia's population. However, due to the inability to coordinate with the church, GD has significantly toned down on this campaign message.

Looking Ahead

Political analysts assess Georgian Dream's campaign rhetoric reflects the fear of losing power, a concern that seems justified. Edison Research polling indicates that GD's support has dropped to 32%, a stark contrast to the ruling party's own pollster, GORBI, which forecasts an unrealistic 59% majority - figures GD has never achieved, even at its peak in 2012. Even though in 2016 it secured 115 seats, only 44 of these were through proportional representation, with the remaining 71 coming from majoritarian districts.

Thus, with the drop in support, GD seems to face challenges in securing the support needed to win a majority under the fully proportional electoral system. Should GD secure a constitutional majority in the 11th Convocation of Parliament, it is likely to seek a return to the majoritarian system, fear political analysts. If this happens, the proportional system, one of the major democratic gains of recent years, will be reversed.

About the author:



Mariam Chikhladze is an independent international consultant specializing in democratic elections, civil society development, and parliamentary and political party strengthening. She has extensive experience with USAID's governance programs in Georgia, managing the parliamentary support portfolios. She has also contributed to UNDP's key legislative strengthening project. Previously, Mariam worked with the International Republican Institute (IRI) on programs in Georgia and Armenia and on behalf of the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, facilitated the political parties' pledge for election integrity in the 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia. Earlier in her career, she managed the grassroots empowerment program of the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) in four regions of Georgia. Mariam Chikhladze holds a Master's in Public Policy Analysis from the Bush School of Public Service and Government at Texas A&M University, awarded through the Fulbright Graduate Student Program. She also completed the Edmund Muskie Professional Fellowship at the Hudson Institute, in Washington, DC.

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