

A Referendum on Europe: Georgia's Opposition Gears Up for Change



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As Georgia gears up for its parliamentary elections on October 26, 2024, opposition parties are consolidating their efforts into coalitions with the objective of displacing the ruling party. These coalitions are fueled by concerns that the current government is jeopardizing the nation's European Union integration by enacting anti-democratic laws and promoting anti-Western sentiments. This election presents a pivotal chance for the opposition leading to the formation of four significant electoral alliances. They are framing the elections as a referendum on the critical choice between aligning with Europe or falling under Russian influence.

In light of the "Georgian Dream" government's controversial adoption of the Transparency of Foreign Influence Law, which has faced widespread public and international backlash, the opposition has united around the imperative to protect Georgia's European path. President Salome Zurbishvili has introduced the "Georgian Charter," a comprehensive reform agenda aimed at accelerating EU integration, binding signatory parties to implement democratic reforms within a year of the elections.

While there is broad agreement on the reform agenda, analysts remain cautious about the opposition's genuine commitment due to their history of fragmentation. Each coalition/Party - Unity Coalition, Coalition for Change, Coalition Strong Georgia, and For Georgia - brings distinct strengths and challenges, with varying strategies for EU alignment and democratic reforms.

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Ahead of Georgia's parliamentary elections scheduled on October 26, 2024, opposition political forces united into electoral coalitions with the explicit aim of unseating the ruling party, Georgian Dream. This coalition-building effort is driven by concerns that the current government is **undermining** the country's EU integration by enacting anti-democratic **laws** and fostering anti-Western **narratives**.

These elections represent a critical opportunity for the opposition to secure a substantial presence in parliament and potentially form a governing coalition, due to the proportional electoral system in place. Two primary factors have compelled the opposition to unite: the 5% minimum support threshold required for parliamentary representation and the prohibition of party blocs, a significant change from previous electoral cycles. In response to these challenges, a diverse array of political backgrounds and groups within the Georgian opposition have come together to form three major electoral alliances, all aimed at challenging the dominance of the Georgian Dream party.

The opposition is framing these elections as a referendum on pivotal issues: European integration versus Russian influence, democracy versus authoritarianism, and one-party rule versus coalition governance. All major participating coalitions share a commitment to EU integration and are signatories of the **Georgian Charter**, which delineates a strategic roadmap for achieving this goal. The outcome of these elections will likely have profound implications for Georgia's political landscape and its future trajectory to the EU.

Elections as a Referendum

Since the late spring, following the government's adoption of the Russia-style law on the Transparency of Foreign Influence (dubbed as the Foreign Agents/Russian Law), despite widespread public resistance and strong condemnations from Georgia's allies, it has become evident that the ruling party has **deviated** from the pro-European path which still remains the civilizational **choice** for the overwhelming majority of Georgian citizens. The adoption of this law, coupled with the ruling party's anti-Western rhetoric, has dispersed the previously maintained strategic **ambiguity** regarding Georgia's international alignment.

In response, the opposition capitalised on public frustration with the ruling party's pro-Russian turn and consolidated around the message that Georgia's European trajectory must be safeguarded to prevent the country from slipping into Russia's sphere of influence. Thus, the upcoming elections are framed as a referendum on the fundamental strategic choice between Europe and Russia. To guide this effort, President Salome Zurbishvili proposed a roadmap for opposition parties to navigate the path forward.

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Georgian Charter: Roadmap for EU Integration

On May 26, 2024, President Salome Zourabichvili unveiled the “Georgian Charter,” a comprehensive reform agenda designed to expedite Georgia’s EU integration, particularly as the current window of opportunity remains open. This initiative has [garnered](#) broad support from all major electoral alliances and parties, signaling a united front in pursuing European alignment.

The new parliamentary convocation will be tasked with enacting legislative and institutional reforms across critical areas of democratic governance in line with the EU Commission’s [recommendations](#). This includes the repeal of laws that obstruct European progress, as well as reforms to the justice system, law enforcement, independent oversight institutions, regulatory bodies, and the electoral code.

Importantly, the government formed by the newly elected parliament will effectively be proposed by the President, comprising technical professionals dedicated to implementing the outlined policies. Following a year in office, snap parliamentary elections will be called to bring a new government under improved electoral rules and a fair [environment](#) reflective of the will of Georgian citizens.

Ultimately, the “Georgian Charter” serves as the electoral program for its signatory parties, binding them to undertake necessary democratic reforms. Despite the apparent consensus on the reform agenda, political analysts express skepticism regarding the parties’ genuine commitment to the technical government (and one-year mandate), particularly considering their recent history of discord and limited experience in coalition-building.

Electoral Coalitions

The Georgian Charter established a crucial framework for the opposition political spectrum to unify their electoral message. However, it didn’t offer specific tactical guidance, leaving it to the parties to determine the most effective coalition configurations to achieve their shared objectives.

Without consolidation, most opposition parties would likely have [struggled](#) to surpass the required voting threshold for legislative representation. Consequently, merging their support into electoral coalitions was seen as essential for opposition success, resulting in four major groupings. While none is expected to outperform Georgian Dream individually, if they all secure parliamentary seats, they could unite to form a coalition government and potentially end Georgian Dream’s 12-year rule.

■ Unity - to Save Georgia

This coalition is led by two major opposition parties: United National Movement and Strategy Aghmashenebeli. It was recently joined by the remnants of the European Georgia Party after the withdrawal

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of its leaders following the internal disagreements triggered by the party primaries. The coalition's strength is rooted in the UNM's long-standing support base, making it the largest opposition party in Georgia. Their electoral list includes some prominent representatives of the UNM party and its coalition member leaders, as well as some new faces who joined the party politics for this pivotal election.

The coalition's electoral platform is creatively packaged in a flyer designed to resemble a passport, symbolizing their commitment to EU integration. The UNM has underscored its priorities by advocating for an EU [passport](#) and pursuing €14 billion in European support for national reconstruction.

■ Coalition for Change

Another pro-Western electoral grouping expected to overcome the barrier is the Coalition for Change. It includes notable former UNM figures and libertarian elements, positioning itself as an alternative to the UNM. Their electoral list is headed by Nana Malashkhia, a civil servant known for her iconic [photo](#) holding the EU flag against a water cannon during the March 2023 protests sparked by the introduction of the Transparency of Foreign Influence Law. A cornerstone of the Coalition's program is the EU integration and the ambition to double the country's economy.

■ Coalition Strong Georgia

Coalition Strong Georgia comprises Lelo for Georgia, led by well-known banker Mamuka Khazaradze, along with several smaller and newer political entities. The Freedom Square movement, a recent addition, consists of former academics and civil society figures engaging in partisan politics to advocate for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic future. Their campaign, titled "[Ilia's Way](#)," focuses on implementing EU recommendations to expedite membership negotiations following the elections. This coalition aims to appeal to undecided voters who are disenchanted with both the Georgian Dream and the prospect of the UNM's return to power position.

■ Giorgi Gakharia's Party - For Georgia

For Georgia is led by Giorgi Gakharia, a Moscow-educated business administrator, who held high-level positions in Georgian Dream's government until he broke ranks with Ivanishvili in 2021. He established his own party For Georgia and emphasised significant social welfare initiatives, proposing the establishment of a minimum salary and substantial support for unemployed individuals.

Like Coalition Strong Georgia, Gakharia presents himself as an alternative for voters seeking a third option, disillusioned with both, the former and the incumbent ruling parties. However, his past actions, including a violent [crackdown](#) on protests in 2019, complicate his position.

President Zourabichvili attempted to broker a coalition between Gakharia and Khazaradze, but discussions broke down, and they opted to run [separately](#). Analysts assess that combined, they potentially could've been the largest opposition party or, if not, decisive in creating a governing coalition, though cautioned that different opinion polls paint different pictures.

In principle, despite a unified message on EU integration and strategic realignments, mobilizing undecided voters to get out and vote, remains the key challenge for the opposition spectrum. A staggering 61% of Georgians feel that no political party represents their interests.

Three key hurdles stand in the way of opposition success.

1. The Georgian Dream's fearmongering effectively frames them as the guarantors of stability, suggesting that a shift in power could lead to heightened tensions with Russia. Whether the opposition has successfully countered these fears remains in question.
2. The recent history of infighting and discord has sown distrust among voters regarding the opposition's ability to unite and govern in coalition.
3. It could be the case that the parties have put forth a compelling, distinct vision for Georgia's future that resonates with the public, considering the sense of a lack of representation. Instead of engaging in meaningful debates with their versions of Georgia's development projects, they may have left citizens - concerned about the authoritarian drift and pro-Russian tendencies of the Georgian Dream - facing a tough decision: support a party that may not reflect their needs or risk continuing the current trajectory.

Looking Ahead

According to article 56th of the Georgian [Constitution](#), the political party that achieves the best results in the parliamentary elections nominates the candidate for Prime Minister and forms the government. If the cabinet does not secure a vote of confidence, at least one-third of parliamentary members can propose an alternative candidate. Experts suggest that this presents a significant opportunity for the opposition to form an alternative coalition if the Georgian Dream fails to secure a simple majority. Should the Parliament not grant a vote of confidence within the designated timeframe, the President shall dissolve Parliament and call for extraordinary elections.

In essence, the upcoming elections represent a critical test for opposition political parties, challenging them to capitalise on any momentum that emerges. Success will hinge on their ability to forge a governing coalition across diverse political groups and maintain a steadfast commitment to the one-year mandate for delivering EU integration. This election could set a precedent for coalition governance in Georgian politics, ultimately determining the country's path toward a European future.

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