

A Stolen Election and a Stolen Future: Georgia's Defiant Resistance



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A stolen election, a stolen future—Georgia stands at a crossroads. In the face of political betrayal, violent repression, and shattered democratic aspirations, a defiant resistance has emerged. From the streets of Tbilisi to international political platforms, the fight for free and fair elections is intensifying. The vast majority of Georgians demand new elections. Will the voices of the people prevail against authoritarian rule, or is Georgia on the brink of losing its European future?

This article delves into the roots of Georgia's uprising, examining the fraudulent elections that sparked nationwide protests, the government's crackdown on dissent, and the broader implications of abandoning EU integration path. It explores the growing demand for new elections, the international response, and the leadership vacuum within the opposition. Through a detailed analysis of political dynamics, public sentiment, and external pressures, this piece unpacks Georgia's ongoing struggle for democracy.

Uprising

For over two months now, Tbilisi's central Rustaveli Avenue has stood as the political soul of the nation, witnessing an unprecedented display of peaceful resistance each evening, as citizens demand new elections and the liberation of political prisoners. The protests have evolved into a powerful grassroots movement, encompassing marches uniting workers across various professions, workplace boycotts, human chain flash mobs, spontaneous New Year celebrations on Rustaveli Avenue, and daily demonstrations at Georgia's public television station. This wave of dissent has expanded beyond Tbilisi, reaching cities like Batumi, Kutaisi, and Zugdidi.

Nationwide protest erupted on November 28, 2024, when the Georgian Dream (GD) government suspended EU accession negotiations until 2028. This move, in direct violation of Georgia's constitutional commitment to EU integration, marked the culmination of GD's authoritarian entrenchment. The decision came at a time when protests against fraudulent elections had lost momentum. Seizing this lull, GD moved to abandon the EU accession process, aiming to shed the constraints of EU membership conditions and tighten its domestic grip on power. However, this time, GD made an error in judgment.

What truly distinguishes this protest is its remarkable nature: it's horizontal and peaceful. Without a central figure or designated leaders, the protesters have self-organized into small, decentralized groups, uniting in their resistance to the government through nonviolent means. This protest movement carries an anger for betrayal and determination not to give up on Georgia's European future.

In response, the GD government has wielded its repressive apparatus to silence dissent, using excessive force against peaceful demonstrators, detaining and mistreating them to assert unchecked power, and advancing repressive legislation to quell the resistance. Simultaneously, it has dismissed public sector employees who refused to comply and suppressed independent media to silence its critics. However, these actions have largely backfired, fostering greater solidarity among protesters and further fueling their revolt.

Internationally, the GD government has been facing mounting political rejection and diplomatic isolation. The United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have imposed sanctions on Georgian officials, restricting visas and freezing assets. In a striking rebuke, the U.S. has even suspended its strategic partnership with Georgia. The Georgian government is now ostracized from Western political platforms and forums. The Georgian parliamentary delegation withdrew from the PACE after its [decision](#) to ratify the full credentials for the delegation under the condition that the Georgian authorities announce new elections and release all political prisoners.

In the face of such widespread condemnation, the only Georgian leader who continues to hold sway internationally is Salome Zurbishvili, the country's fifth president. After the expiration of her six-year term, a bizarre figure, elected by the electoral college dominated by GD, took office.

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Thus, the GD government lacks both the domestic legitimacy and external recognition required to govern and function effectively. Within two months of the elections, only about 25% of Georgians openly support GD—a stark indictment of its inflated electoral claims. As its actions grow increasingly violent and repressive, the cost to its governance increases.

Escalation and Repression

The GD's response to the protests has plunged the resistance into a crisis, by effectively taking hostages—arresting peaceful protesters and subjecting them to unjust criminal charges. However, these repressive actions have only intensified public disobedience, galvanizing a movement resolute in its resistance to the regime.

The riot police [addressed](#) the protests by unleashed brutality, resembling OMON-Style crackdowns in Russia and Belarus. Video footage capturing the brutal beatings of peaceful demonstrators and journalists covering the protests live travelled on social networks and international media. They targeted peaceful protesters, journalists, and even bystanders to demonstrate an indiscriminate approach and sow fear among protesters. Police even pursued protesters outside of demonstrations, conducting searches and arrests in their homes¹. For brutal crackdowns on media members, opposition figures, and protesters, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [sanctioned](#) high-level officials of the Ministry of Interior under the Global Magnitsky Act. Reports on mistreatment (tantamount to torture) in detention vehicles and pre-detention facilities compelled some prominent GD loyalists to come to the resistance's [side](#).

The absence of accountability, reflected in the lack of any charges or disciplinary actions against the perpetrators, has emboldened law enforcement to perpetuate these practices. Impunity encourages GD-affiliated non-formal groups, effectively hired street gangs often referred to as "titushki" similar to during Ukraine's Euromaidan, to [assault](#) prominent protesters and journalists.

This repressive apparatus extends beyond street-level violence, reaching into legal and administrative measures. Arbitrary detentions, fabricated charges, and the weaponization of laws to criminalize resistance are all part of the government's broader strategy to silence resistance and quell dissent. The recent [adoption](#) of laws that increased fines for protesters, expanded the scope for extrajudicial detention (including preventive detention), and simplified new recruitment into the police force proves that the state tactic is to suffocate the resistance². The recent [arrest](#) of the head of the head

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1 Thus far, more than 500 have been detained, of these, majority of them face administrative charges and more than 50 are facing criminal prosecution. In the first 10 days of protest, 80% of those detained, have been subjected to ill-treatment by special police forces – with many cases amounting to torture.

2 GD also [announced](#) legislative changes increasing sanctions for a number of administrative and criminal offenses, including "insulting officials" and "assaulting police." Threatening to attack or use violence against civic servants will become a criminal offense, too. Public calls for violence which used to be an administrative offence, will now be punished by imprisonment for up to three years instead of financial sanctions.

of an independent online media outlet is a stark example of the government's retaliation against criticism. The journalist now faces years of imprisonment for slapping an official who had mistreated her, highlighting the regime's ongoing vendetta against civil society at large. Stirred by the injustice, she went on a [hunger strike](#) from the day of her detention, enduring it for over a month.

The regime has sought to exact revenge on dissent within the civil service, implementing massive dismissals of civil servants on political grounds, primarily targeting those who have [expressed](#) support for the protest. In response to civil servants who have opposed the government's actions, GD called for a "self-cleansing" of the civil service and made significant amendments to the respective law, effectively substituting the independent civil service with political appointees and undermining key protective mechanisms that could shield a servant from political influence. This political persecution aims to stifle any resistance to the government agenda within the system and maintain the bureaucratic routine. In response, dismissed civil servants have formed a [union](#), which aims to [serve](#) as an umbrella for their colleagues who fall victim to the regime's authoritarian rule.

Having effectively usurped power and captured all state institutions, GD is relying on brutal repression to maintain its control. This authoritarian shift jeopardizes Georgia's future, as the regime undermines the very prospects that many Georgians, particularly the youth, hold dear. At the heart of the street protests are young Georgians who view this authoritarian, police state as a phantom of the past, incompatible with their own Georgian dream. Their solidarity with one another is unwavering, and they are locked in an uncompromising fight for their future. They demand the release of what they call the "regime hostages."

Yet, even if the regime made a single concession, it would not resolve the crisis. The crisis was primarily triggered by the government's breach of the social contract regarding Georgia's European integration.

Breaking the Social Contract

The GD government's abrupt decision to remove EU integration from the political agenda triggered nationwide unrest. Just a month after securing a disputed victory in the elections, GD violated a constitutional provision that enshrines Georgia's national consensus on its future—a social contract between the government and its people, affirming the country's civilizational choice to join the European and Euro-Atlantic community. This betrayal was not only a breach of constitutional duty but also a deception of GD's own supporters.

Prior to the elections, GD explicitly campaigned on a pro-European platform. Its slogan —*"With Peace, Dignity, and Prosperity to Europe"*— reinforced its (ostensible) commitment to EU integration. In campaign speeches, GD's founder assured voters that his team had the "experience, ability, and, most importantly, political will" to lead Georgia into the European Union while safeguarding its national dignity. However, the post-election reversal exposed this rhetoric as nothing more than manipulative rhetoric, designed to placate pro-European supporters while secretly pursuing an entirely different agenda.

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For at least three years, GD had been maintaining a strategic ambiguity—declaring EU integration a priority while systematically distancing itself from Europe. The party’s pre-election messaging played into nationalist fears, portraying the West as a force intent on erasing Georgia’s Christian values and national identity, by imposing foreign laws and undermining the country’s sovereignty. Using this narrative, GD justified the passage of the anti-democratic “Foreign Agents Law” and later, anti-LGBTQ legislation. Despite framing its actions as resistance to external “pressure”, GD assured voters that it remained committed to pursuing European integration—albeit on its own terms.

In essence, the GD’s message was carefully crafted to resonate with the national consensus on EU integration, offering reassurance to its pro-European loyalists. However, by formally abandoning the European path, the GD fooled its own voters. Despite the percentage of votes the party secured, it remained tethered to the aspirations of over 80% of Georgians who favor EU integration, including many of its voters, who had believed in the promise of eventual accession.

Beyond electoral rhetoric, EU integration is an institutionalized national priority. [Article 78](#) of Georgia’s Constitution explicitly mandates that “*constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.*” By unilaterally suspending EU accession, GD not only defied public will but violated the nation’s constitutional social contract, undermining a fundamental pillar of Georgia’s democratic trajectory.

The backlash was immediate. Widespread protests erupted, particularly among Georgia’s public service sector, where generations of professionals had dedicated their careers to advancing EU integration. For them, GD’s decision nullified years of effort overnight. As a stark symbol of Georgia’s perceived pivot toward Russia, ambassadors to several EU member states and the United States resigned in protest.

Many wonder why GD chose to make such a drastic and explicit break with the EU. Timing indeed played a critical role. With momentum from protests against rigged elections fading, GD likely saw an opportunity to finalize what it had already set in motion. However, while the timing may be explained, the decision itself points to deeper geopolitical forces—most notably, Moscow’s influence.

This move aligns with GD’s broader pattern of downplaying Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations while normalizing anti-Western rhetoric. More significantly, it directly serves Russia’s strategic interests, cementing Georgia within its sphere of influence. In response, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned Bidzina Ivanishvili, citing his role in enabling human rights abuses and undermining Georgia’s European future in service of the Russian Federation.

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By breaking the social contract on EU integration just one month after the elections, GD shattered the national consensus that had defined Georgia's post-independence trajectory. According to the latest data, 55% of Georgians are convinced GD is pursuing a pro-Russian foreign policy course. Had the government announced this decision before the elections, it is unlikely it would have retained the same level of support. Thus, from the very first day of protests, the demand for new elections was not only justified but the only resolution of the constitutional and political crisis.

Rigged Elections

The abortion of the EU integration was the final straw, but not the sole reason for the ongoing popular discontent. The culmination of authoritarian entrenchment was pre-decided by fraudulent elections. It is now widely recognized that the elections did not reflect the will of the voters. The EU's technical mission to assess irregularities in the parliamentary elections was ultimately canceled, as the final assessments from both international and domestic monitoring organizations, as well as the circulated evidence, left no room for ambiguity. President Zurabishvili, together with opposition political parties, labeled the election a "Russian special operation," drawing a direct comparison to the Kremlin's euphemism for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and renounced their mandates.

Moreover, the GD government's subsequent illegal actions—such as convening parliament without a Constitutional Court ruling, approving the government, and electing the President through a single-party parliament—further undermined the legitimacy of the process.

The elections themselves were rigged through various means, including violations of ballot secrecy, vote-buying, elaborate carousel voting, and extensive propaganda machinery, resulting in nearly a 54% victory for GD. International monitoring missions have already released their final assessments, unequivocally reflecting widely discussed concerns corollary to the conclusion that the election results do not reflect the will of the voters. Domestic monitoring organizations have consolidated their findings, identifying a large-scale, multi-faceted election-rigging scheme orchestrated in favor of the Georgian Dream.

ODIHR's final report highlights all the major concerns raised around this disputed election, including the abuse of administrative resources, GD's unfair advantage gained through the pre-election legislative changes, vote-buying, breaches of vote secrecy, and multiple instances of voting fraud.

It underscores that the ruling party held a significant financial advantage over its competitors in terms of state funding, private donations, and campaign spending. Moreover, pre-election legal framework changes related to the decision-making at the central

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election commission, as well as the rule of appointing the precinct election commission members, turned out to be components of the sophisticated rigging [scheme](#), as local election observation organizations [assess](#).

Crucially, reports of voter [pressure](#), particularly on public sector employees, were widespread throughout the campaign. This, combined with extensive [voter tracking](#) on election day, raised concerns about voters' ability to cast their ballots without fear of retribution. Intimidation, coercion, and inducement—especially against public sector employees and the economically vulnerable—persisted throughout the process, further undermining the integrity of the election. Also, financial incentives for various social groups and a government amnesty program, while not strictly illegal, provided an undue advantage to the incumbent government. These are perceived to be the top influential factors that distorted the election results, the latest [poll](#) suggests.

Crucially, across all major domestic observation missions, observers noted the organized tracking of voters, the presence of unauthorized persons, and systematic vote-buying efforts, indicating a structured [plan](#) to control voter behavior in favor of the ruling party. Before and after the elections media investigations reports have proved that the ruling party had a well-structured system that enabled them to control voters by [collecting](#) personal information on voters (receipt of social assistance, incarceration, probation, and more.) and then tracking the voters on election day through so-called call centers. There were reports about the confiscation of voter IDs and collection of ID numbers of voters that likely were used in the rigging [scheme](#) where GD loyalists were casting votes multiple times using someone else's IDs. Requests to investigate these widespread reports of confiscation of IDs were [ignored](#) by the prosecutor's office and law enforcement.

On the issue of vote secrecy, OSCE ODIHR [reported](#) that in numerous cases—24% of observations—ballot secrecy was potentially compromised. This occurred due to improper ballot insertion, inadequate polling station layouts, and visible marks on ballots. In fact, the marks indicating voters' choices were visible on the reverse side of the ballot papers. This violation of the core constitutional principle of democratic elections, the secrecy of the vote casted, undermined the confidence in election integrity. The district court of Tetrtskaro [annulled](#) the results for the entire district due to the transparency of the ballot papers. This ruling was overturned by the court of appeals, whose bench comprises prominent representatives of the judiciary clan, some of whom are subject to US sanctions.

Dispute resolution, too, was a mockery of the democratic process. Over 1,100 [complaints](#) were filed by parties and observer organizations, yet most were dismissed by the DEC's after limited investigation, with courts largely upholding these dismissals after minimal scrutiny. Furthermore, the appeals to the CEC, courts, and the Constitutional Court were similarly dismissed. The handling of

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post-election complaints was found to undermine the right to [due process](#), failing to provide an effective remedy or adequately address widespread concerns about the integrity of the election results.

Notably, EPDE exclusively [uncovered](#) the GD tactic to whitewash widespread electoral fraud, involving 23 politically biased observers in the election observation missions. Despite numerous reports of voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, and manipulation of electoral processes under the GD government, these observers—many with ties to the parliaments of Western democracies—issued statements falsely claiming the election was free and fair. EPDE warns that such practices, historically used by authoritarian regimes, now threaten democratic integrity globally and calls for a strict review of funding and cooperation with organizations employing fake observers.

New Elections

Legally, there are two potential [pathways](#) in the post-election crisis environment. The first option is to hold repeated elections—an avenue available only if the original election results have not been officially tabulated. However, that is not the case here, as the CEC has already released the final tabulated results, and the Constitutional Court of Georgia has declined to accept the appeal for reconsideration.

The second option involves snap elections, which occur when the government resigns and the parliament fails to form a new one, prompting the President to call for snap elections.

Protesters remain united on this very precise demand: new, free, and fair elections under international supervision. According to the latest public opinion [poll](#), over 80% of Georgians acknowledge the country faces a crisis, and 62% support new elections.

For the goal of the protest, the new elections would only make sense if the electoral environment were conducive to a genuinely democratic parliamentary contest. This would require strict international monitoring and an election administration free from the ruling party's influence.

Thus far, there is no indication that the GD will acknowledge its legitimacy crisis and fulfill public demand. Instead, it appears intent on using all institutional forces to maintain its hold on power, employing both brutal repression and draconian laws to suffocate dissent. Any sign of retreat from this authoritarian stance could be seen as a weakness by its supporters and may ultimately lead to its defeat. Thus, snap elections remain a theoretical possibility, but less probable under the current circumstances.

Even as its support declines, GD benefits from the weak backing of mainstream opposition parties. According to the [poll](#), no opposition party garners more than 10% of support when respondents are asked which party they would vote for if elections were held today. Notably, up to 35% of voters feel politically homeless today. This highlights the need for opposition parties to rethink their strategies to engage

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undecided voters and for new political movements to enter the political competition, given the evident lack of leadership on the opposition front. Addressing this gap could weaken GD's advantage and reshape the political landscape.

To achieve major change, public protest and international pressure on the GD should intensify to a degree when the political, economic, and diplomatic costs of maintaining the status quo are higher than the new elections. Georgia's protests have maintained momentum, and have significant support, however, the question remains as to whether it is sufficient to restore Georgia's democracy and European aspirations.

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