



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# Georgia at a historic crossroads, but not on the path to long-term stability



In the parliamentary elections next Saturday, Georgia will receive important answers about its political future, primarily about its internal disunity in relation to the EU on the one hand and Russia on the other.

However, whatever those answers are, the day after the election will not mark the beginning of the internal stabilisation of the situation in the former republic of the USSR.

The sharp political division within Georgia is a direct consequence of the confrontation between the EU and Russia due to Russian aggression against Ukraine. The young democracy of the Caucasus state simply failed to strengthen enough to readily face a major conflict in its immediate vicinity, on which its future directly depends.

One indicator of the insufficient maturity of Georgian democracy is the lack of reliable polls regarding the outcome of the parliamentary elections on October 26—even two days before the elections.

Furthermore, their results are entirely contradictory, as they are influenced by the political affiliation of their clients. Local research agency GORBI, which favours the ruling Georgian Dream Party, **predicts** its landslide victory with close to 60% of the vote.

On the other hand, Edison Research, commissioned by the opposition TV station, conducted a survey **according** to which the ruling Georgian Dream will win only 34% of the vote next Saturday and will become the opposition, as several pro-European parties and coalitions will together win an overwhelming 53% of the vote.

## A close result—the least favourable option

If the first scenario materialises and the ruling Georgian Dream Party wins a clear majority, Georgia will undoubtedly **deviate** from its path towards membership of the European Union and thus strengthen its relations with Russia.

According to the second option, Georgia's long-term support for the movement toward the West and membership in the EU and even NATO will gain full electoral legitimacy and break the current deadlock.

However, the most detrimental scenario for Georgia's stability and the resolution of years-long political tensions would be a narrow victory in the elections between the pro-Russian and pro-European camps. Regrettably, the likelihood of this scenario materialising in Georgia is high.

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A small difference in the election results will confirm the already existing polarisation among the 3.5 million registered voters. Furthermore, it will give both parties a chance to challenge the results in the event of defeat after the elections, thus exacerbating the political crisis.

It will be easier for the current opposition to do so, given its frequent objections to the regularity of the process dictated by the government under the control of Georgian Dream and its leader, oligarch and former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili.

On the other hand, if pro-EU parties emerge victorious in the elections, despite the fragmentation of this bloc, there is a risk of heightened repression of the current ruling structure, which would undoubtedly have Moscow's full support.

## Russia clearly announces its interference

So far, Russia has sent clear enough signals that it will not hesitate to interfere in Georgia's post-election situation. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in September that Russia is ready to "help" Georgia "normalise its relations

with the neighbouring states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia," which the ruling party welcomed.

In other words, Lavrov asked Georgians to vote for Moscow's favourite, Mr Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream, in the elections, with the promise that the reward would be the healing of Georgia's still-fresh wounds from Russia's annexation of two areas it considers its own.

### The ruling party feeds the voters' fear of a new war, specifically one against Russia

An even more convincing message, even in the form of a threat that Georgia must remain loyal to Moscow, came continuously during the campaign from the ruling party itself. Ivanishvili, the leader of the ruling party, **defined** the forthcoming elections as a choice between "war and peace."

To make his message even clearer, Georgian Dream put up billboards with photos of destroyed Ukrainian towns and villages and, on the other hand, scenes from Georgian settlements where the buildings are whole and undamaged.

In this way, the ruling party feeds the voters' fear of a new war, specifically one against Russia, as they still vividly recall the Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008.

## High stakes for Russia and the EU

On the other hand, it is difficult to treat pro-European forces as a single bloc given that liberals, conservatives, and social democrats are among the four or five lists in the elections that have a genuine chance of crossing the electoral threshold of 5% of votes.

Even if they jointly win more than half of the total of 150 seats in the parliament, it is uncertain how much capacity they will have to preserve themselves as a bloc and continue

the EU accession process.

However, the process faced an obstacle from the outset. Georgia was granted EU candidate status in December last year, but the process was halted in June because the parliament in Tbilisi passed the so-called "Russian laws," which treat pro-European NGOs and media as foreign agents and discriminate against the LGBTQ population.



*The resistance to Russian influence will be as successful as the EU's readiness to quickly support a possible pro-European government in Tbilisi and help it achieve a quick win - President of Georgia Salome Zourabichvili with Ursula von der Leyen*

"If the opposition loses to Georgian Dream once again, it will have only itself to blame," **wrote** Beka Chedia, professor of political science from Tbilisi, for The Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA).

At the crossroads before which Georgia stands, the stakes of Russia and the EU are also high. Moscow will be primarily satisfied with the victory of its favourite, Ivanishvili, which will probably lead to the election of the pro-Russian president of Georgia.

For the first time, Georgia will elect the president indirectly, rather than through direct elections, by choosing 150 deputies and an equal number of local authority representatives.

A pro-Russian government and president in Tbilisi will be a tremendous relief for Moscow, not only because Georgia will be out of the orbit of Western influence for a long time, but even more so because it will remain an

important point for circumventing trade and financial sanctions.

The opposite outcome will give enthusiasm to pro-European forces in Georgia, which have been organising mass protests against the pro-Russian government for months. However, this alone won't guarantee Georgia's unblocking of the path to the EU and its commitment to internal reforms and stabilisation of democracy.

The resistance to Russian influence will be as successful as the EU's readiness to quickly support a possible pro-European government in Tbilisi and help it achieve a quick win, which will be convincing proof that the European perspective is tangible.