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Russia Is Playing a Long Game. Georgia Cannot Fight It Alone

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A girl with Georgian and EU flags in Tbilisi. **Zurab Tsertsvadze / AP / TASS**

On October 26, Georgians went out to vote in much-anticipated parliamentary elections, hopeful that the day would see their country remain on its democratic path and maybe even freeze oligarch former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili out of power.

The last dregs of that hope vanished shortly after the polling stations closed. Premature jubilation over the exit polls published by what remains of Georgia's independent media was soon replaced by despairing silence as the first official results were published.

Exit polls had the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party trailing at around 42 % of the vote. The final results from the Central Election Commission catapulted GD to nearly 54 %, giving the regime a solid governing majority but falling short of its stated aim of securing a unilateral constitution-amending supermajority.

For the last three decades, Georgia has remained a democracy, albeit a flawed one. Though elections were held, the playing field was engineered to allow strongmen leaders to dominate. But their removal at the ballot box remained a possibility.

Russia recognized the potential of subverting Georgia from the inside through democratic means for Moscow's benefit. The 2012 election, which saw the Russian proxy billionaire oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili break through and capture political power, marked the beginning of a comprehensive and iterative agenda of regime building.

Ivanishvili transformed the system so it still looked like an electoral democracy. But in practice, the crucial ability for the electorate to remove the leader was gone.

Russia's long game in Georgia, which intensified with the start of Ivanishvili's rule, sought to transform Georgia's political system and society to bring them closer in alignment with Moscow. Elections are a central pillar of this effort. According to political scientist and Russia expert Timothy Frye, Putin needed to strike a balance between cheating too much and looking weak, or not interfering enough to secure his desired outcome. "Fraud is a much blunter tool than many realize."

Like Putin, Ivanishvili has succeeded in this tradeoff. However, the 2024 elections posed unique structural challenges that upset the careful balance of the extent of fraud necessary to win elections.

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For the first time in a decade, the Ivanishvili regime faced credible challenges to its electoral legitimacy. To win the October 26 elections, the regime had to skew the playing field so harshly that it had to sacrifice plausible pretenses of genuine popular support.

This can be seen in the distribution of the results. The "Russian tail" describes an unusal pattern of votes for Georgian Dream, deviating from a normal distribution. Graphics illustrating this bizarre pattern, especially in rural areas, appeared online almost immediately after the elections. This shape strongly points to the likelihood of mass manipulation of votes, including ballot stuffing and so-called "carousel voting"; however, such claims require further proof.

President Salome Zourabichvili, widely seen as the only remaining independent constitutional institution in Georgia, has called the elections "totally fraudulent" and "a result of Russian special operation." The four major opposition parties that crossed the 5 % threshold condemned the elections as unfree, unfair and not reflecting the will of the Georgian people. They pledged to boycott parliament's work and refuse to cooperate until the regime concedes and launches an investigation into electoral fraud and reruns the elections under more exacting international scrutiny.

This is important insofar as the presence of Russian tail could be attributed to the regime's successful voter mobilization campaign in rural areas. Indeed, the regime has an extensive network in rural areas that includes local officials, law enforcement, and the party apparatus, who run sophisticated schemes of carrots and sticks to maximize voter turnout.

Local election watchdogs and observation missions have concluded that the playing field was so systematically distorted and fraudulent manipulations were so widespread that the elections failed to reflect the will of the Georgian people. A local observer mission, My Vote, run by a coalition of leading Georgian civil society organizations, claimed that they had uncovered a fraudulent scheme, supplementing more traditional methods of voter mobilization.

The fraudulent scheme, according to the election watchdogs, involves the mass harvesting of personal documents (ID cards) and personal data of mainly opposition voters. Harvested personal documents were then used for a carousel voting scheme facilitated by the control of two key election officials at the precinct level: one would control the flow of voters into the polling station, while the other operated the electronic voting machines.

If verified, this scheme could also explain why the opposition received fewer votes than in previous elections. Confiscating the documents of prospective opposition voters had a double effect: it demobilized those voters and decreased the opposition's overall support while contributing to the increase in votes for the regime.

It remains uncertain whether these allegations will ever be properly investigated. Georgian Dream vehemently denies the need for investigation into ballot fraud of any scope. International observer missions, without passing ultimate judgment on the vote's legitimacy, have criticized the heavily distorted playing field and the environment of systemic intimidation. This air of pervasive intimidation, clearly visible to even short-term observers, lends plausibility to the widespread manipulation schemes alleged by the opposition and civil society.

Georgian Dream's propaganda created an all-embracing aura of fear of an outbreak of war with Russia in the lead-up to the election The threat to outlaw and prosecute the opposition and everyone who voted for them amplified this anxiety.

The opposition and civil society made a fatal mistake by failing to combat this fear-mongering head-on. They struggled to convince voters that new technologies to verify voter ID and count ballots guaranteed voter secrecy, which was especially egregious when voters arrived at ballot stations could barely cover the ballot paper and the regime's officials could through the thin paper to see who they had voted for. Many who voted, including myself, could attest that secret voting – a hallmark of modern democracy – was systemically disregarded.

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Georgian Dream's opponents framed this election as a referendum on whether Georgia should pursue integration with Europe. The EU made it clear before the elections and confirmed afterward that Georgia will not be able to pursue its European aspirations with the course of the current regime. EU institutions and member states are reluctant to recognize the elections as legitimate. They, joined by the U.S., are voicing increasingly harsh criticisms and are actively demanding measures to restore the integrity of elections, offering a glimmer of hope in this challenging situation.

However, the Ivanishvili regime is not alone. It has support from Russia and its allies, both outside and inside the EU.

Tbilisi insists that it still aspires to EU membership. Nevertheless, the EU it aligns with is that of Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán and his allies. Orbán was the first to congratulate the regime on its apparent victory and soon after arrived in Tbilisi to solidify his support. He reassured Georgian Dream that they could survive the legitimacy crisis. Sadly, their hopes are not delusional. Fellow strongman, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, getting away with his contested victory earlier this year proves just that.

Georgians, with their unwavering spirit, will continue their never-ending fight against Russian imperialism and their place in the European family. However, they will not be able to succeed against Russia's long game alone.

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