

Georgia: towards an authoritarian regime? – Interview with Régis Genté

Description

Georgia's authoritarian drift is a cause for concern. While a law on foreign agents was adopted on 14 May 2024 despite massive opposition from the population, the prospect of parliamentary elections on 26 October raises many questions. Will the ballot be free and fair? What outcome can we expect, particularly given the public's desire for Europe?

A freelance journalist who has lived in the Georgian capital for over 20 years, Régis Genté covers news from the former Soviet Union for various media, including *Radio France Internationale*, *Le Figaro*, and *France 24*. He has also published several books, the most recent of which [*Volodymyr Zelensky - dans la tête d'un héros*](#), was published in 2022. Régis Genté was kind enough to answer *Regard sur l'Est*'s questions.

Is Russian influence growing in Georgia?

Régis Genté: No, because the post-colonial situation in Georgia is still marked by a strong dislike of Russia, as reflected in many opinion polls. The Georgian people want to move closer to Europe, even if that doesn't mean they don't want to live in peace with Russia. But Russia is perceived as dangerous, occupying 20% of Georgian territory and adopting a colonial attitude that is contemptuous of the Georgian people.

The situation in Ukraine is closely followed in Georgia, which sees similarities with its relations with Russia. There is no significant pro-Russian movement in Georgia, where few people support Moscow other than the small groups created and supported by the current Georgian government. However, a growing minority believes that Russia is becoming too dangerous and that it is better not to provoke it or damage relations with it. As a result, there is a noticeable caution linked to fear.

The Georgian government has opted for a pro-Russian policy, perhaps out of support but out of fear, intending to protect the country. However, it seems we are in a situation of collaboration rather than caution. This is reflected in government propaganda criticizing the West without directly praising Russia. Tbilisi knows that this would be perceived as an absolute affront by most of the population, who want the country to join the European Union. It's a kind of negative soft power: the government characterizes the West as decadent, which is what Russia has been doing since at least the 19th century. This government communication strongly influences public opinion: we, therefore, have a section of the population that is more anti-Western than pro-Russian and, thus, ready to accept Russia.

What about the Georgian government?

The Georgian regime is very peculiar, headed by an oligarch who holds all the power, while the government has virtually no influence. For example, many members of the government are former employees of Bidzina Ivanishvili: the Minister of the Interior is the former head of his guard, while the former Prime Minister, now President of the Georgian Dream party, Irakli Garibashvili, was his handyman. These people have no autonomous political existence without B. Ivanishvili cannot be a politician. The proof is that in the 12 years this government has been in place, dozens of ministers have succeeded one another without any of them having had a political existence outside the government. They systematically disappear



from the political landscape after leaving their official positions. This was the case, for example, with former prime ministers Mamouka Bakhtadze and Giorgi Kvirikashvili. So there is no government, only an oligarch who runs the country as an autocracy.

This oligarch, who made his fortune in Russia, has no official powers, but he makes all the crucial decisions. He imposed the law on foreign agents for the second time last February-March, despite his government's opposition, which, according to my sources, was afraid of losing public support before the elections next October. So, to speak of a "government" is a misnomer. In reality, Bidzina Ivanishvili decides the country's policy. Not only does he have a large fortune, but he also knows how to make power work in a post-Soviet country. Without any real opposition, he is imposing historic laws that are changing the life of the country and Georgia's geopolitical trajectory.

And yet, are Georgians' standard of living and purchasing power rising?

Indeed, thanks to economic growth, part of the population is living better and better. However, there is also a more affluent section of the population for whom freedom and a global vision of the country are just as important. These people see their future and that of their children in Europe, not Russia.

However, there are doubts about the reliability of the statistics, which could be manipulated. In reality, 240,000 people are thought to have left the country over the last two years. Out of a population of 3.7 million, this is a significant number. The main reason for leaving has been economic. For example, a few years ago, Germany granted seasonal work quotas in the agricultural sector to 5,000 Georgians at a wage of €9 an hour. In Georgia, this is the average daily wage. There were over 100,000 applications. Therefore, the success of the government's economic policy is not sure. There is also inequality in the redistribution of wealth within Georgian society. In 2023, 280 Porsches were sold in Georgia, a record for the country that reveals the gap between the part of the population struggling to survive in a country where inflation is rife and the part that has never been so rich.

Are the legislative elections in October raising hopes?

It is unlikely that there will be any change of direction after the elections, as the government has complete control over the organization of the ballot. For example, it has just changed some electoral administration rules. This government will do anything to stay in power and impose its authoritarian regime. The law on foreign agents will come into force this summer, before the elections, and it is highly likely that it will be used against NGOs whose job is to observe the elections, which could considerably reduce the observation level. Under these conditions, it is not certain that the population will be able to make its voice heard.

Since the protests began, the government has increasingly used violence and brutality against its citizens to impose fear. For example, on 11 June 2023, a young man was beaten up. When citizens who have been beaten up file a complaint, the police do not even take their statements. The young man had been threatened that very morning by the Speaker of Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, and was molested a few hours later. Part of the population is exposed to state violence. However, during the rallies, there were no incidents involving demonstrators, no windows were broken, and no cars were damaged. However, certain members of the government and those in positions of power have encouraged the use of violence against demonstrators. There is talk of widespread violence, including against the leader of the main opposition political party. Therefore, there is no reason to expect a fair election, even if, for a large part of the population, this election will be seen as the last chance to oppose a pro-Russian government and assert itself as a European country.

The recent demonstrations testify to the country's mood, with strong mobilization all over the country, but will this still be the case in October? Won't these people have become demobilized by then? Won't the climate of violence and fear wipe out this mood of resistance? Although oligarch B. Ivanishvili promised to crack down on any opposition at the pro-government demonstration on 29 April, we can't be sure of anything yet: will this law on foreign agents be fully implemented this summer? Will it be used to crack down hard on the independent media, as in Russia, or will its application be more flexible? I fear a radical implementation of this law because of its illegitimacy. The only way to get it

through is by force, intending to change opinion. This is already happening, with more and more people believing that it is wrong to oppose Russia and more and more criticizing the West. These people are subject to the pro-power media, see the West as a decadent world that wishes to destroy Georgian identity, implant LGBT propaganda, and even open up a second front in the war against Russia in Georgia. The alleged need for transparency put forward by the authorities to justify the law on foreign agents is merely a pretext when there are already 15 laws governing the activities of NGOs.

Is a return to the separatist regions on the agenda?

The issue of reintegrating the “separatist” regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is gradually returning to the table. However, the situation remains unclear.

There have been no official moves on this, but we have the impression that specific figures within the Russian and Georgian power structures are testing this possibility. It's a very sensitive issue because Russia has annexed 20% of Georgian territory. It's a “carrot,” a strategy that Russia has already used in Ukraine with the Donbas and in Moldova with Transnistria.

Russia wants these states to become federations where it can interfere with political decisions through separatist regions with puppet regimes. We are only testing, but this situation can become a reality. One possible scenario would be for the Georgian constitution to include a refusal to join NATO or the EU in exchange for the recovery of these breakaway regions. But this is still a long way off.

Could Ukraine's victory be the solution?

The fate of Ukraine is crucial for the region. If Russia loses, it will be weakened everywhere in the former Soviet space, starting with the South Caucasus. On the other hand, if it wins, it can reassert its dominance over the region. All these countries, therefore, depend on the fate of Ukraine. This is even prompting some Georgians to go and fight in Ukraine, where a Georgian legion is present and has claimed around sixty lives.

Thumbnail: Régis Genté.

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