

Georgians Decide Their European Path in Crucial Election

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Georgians Head to Polls in Decisive Vote on EU Future
Georgians are casting their votes in a crucial election that could end 12 years of increasingly authoritarian rule and determine the country's path towards joining the European Union. Many view this election as the most significant since Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. "I voted for a new Georgia," declared pro-Western President Salome Zourabichvili. The ruling Georgian Dream party is expected to lead, but four opposition groups aim to unite and oust it, reviving Georgia's EU aspirations. With four out of five voters supporting EU membership, the stakes are high in this South Caucasus state, which experienced a brief war with Russia in 2008. Last December, the EU granted Georgia candidate status, but recently froze the bid, citing concerns over democratic backsliding due to a controversial law requiring foreign-funded groups to register as "foreign agents." Approximately 3.5 million Georgians are eligible to vote until 16:00 GMT in an election framed by the opposition as a choice between Europe and Russia, while the government presents it as a matter of peace versus war. The political climate has grown increasingly polarized, with Georgian Dream, led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, seeking a fourth term. If Georgian Dream secures a significant majority, Ivanishvili has vowed to ban the largest opposition party, the United National Movement, for its past actions. Opinion polls, though considered unreliable, suggest Georgian Dream may win about a third of the vote. To unseat the ruling party, all four main opposition groups must secure over 5% of the vote to enter the 150-seat parliament. Despite widespread condemnation

of the ruling party's claims and billboards, their slogans resonate with some voters. In Kaspi, an industrial town northwest of Tbilisi, a 41-year-old woman told the BBC, "I don't like Georgian Dream, but I hate the [opposition United] National Movement – and at least we'll be at peace." Another woman, Lali, 68, expressed concerns that while the opposition might bring Europe closer, they could also bring war. The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy has criticized Georgian Dream's campaign, highlighting instances of voter intimidation and Russian- sponsored disinformation. Critics argue that recent changes have been implemented too hastily, raising fears about the secrecy of the vote. In Tbilisi, Vano Chkhikvadze of the Civil Society Foundation pointed to graffiti outside his office, a result of the "foreign influence" law passed amid mass protests. He recounted being labeled a state traitor by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze and receiving threatening phone calls. Ahead of the vote, the EU warned that Georgian Dream's actions "signal a shift towards authoritarianism." Regardless of the outcome, the losing side is unlikely to accept defeat easily.