

Why Georgians Need to Take Hungarian Lessons

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Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's richest man and the de facto leader of the ruling Georgian Dream party, has suffered a political setback. On April 12, prime minister Viktor Orbán, one of Ivanishvili's staunchest allies within the European Union, lost the Hungarian national parliamentary election. Earlier Orbán had vetoed proposed EU sanctions against Georgia's leaders for their venality and abuses of power. Georgian opposition leaders and protestors in Tbilisi hope Orbán's defeat marks the beginning of the end for Georgia's increasingly illiberal regime. Whether they are correct remains unclear.

Victor Orbán's Impact

Victor Orbán's defeat in the Hungarian parliamentary election dealt a significant blow to right-wing populist movements across Europe. Orbán's sophisticated form of what political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way call "competitive authoritarianism" was characterized by institutions that formally respected democratic norms but which used legislation, taxes, media monopolies and intimidation to constrict them.¹ Yet despite sixteen years of Orbán's rule, a democratic opposition survived in Hungary, albeit confined to the political margins. Orbán's defeat prompted joy in Budapest's streets and gave hope to citizens in other European states, including Georgia, who are resisting their own electoral autocracies. The Hungarian opposition's victory suggested that even under oppressive conditions and within a heavily gerrymandered electoral system, elections can still produce political change.

The Hungarian opposition party Tisza, like Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition in the 2023 Polish elections, ran a [successful campaign against corruption](#) and economic injustice. Yet the European Union was crucial in ensuring Tisza's victory. Orbán, an ideological model for Europe's illiberal movements, created a system ostensibly compatible with EU rules. Although Orbán could marginalize the opposition and pressure it into submission, he could not eliminate it entirely. Brussels, through financial, legal and institutional levers including extensive agricultural subsidies, constrained the Orbán regime's ability to adopt more overtly authoritarian measures. Peter Magyar, Tisza's charismatic opposition leader, avoided

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persecution and prison time ahead of the 2026 election because of his parliamentary immunity as a member of the European Parliament. Opposition leaders and protestors in non-EU states such as Georgia enjoy no comparable protections.

Demagoguery and populism have deep roots across Europe. Identity politics has resonated across the region for centuries, not just in the past decade. The geopolitical, demographic and technological threats to security this century – including Europe’s [immigration crisis of 2015-2016](#) – have enhanced the conditions that generate popular fear and resentment. Orbán’s defeat does not mark the end of right-wing populism in Europe, but it does reveal significant vulnerability within the movement. Anti-Western rhetoric, conspiratorialism, and emotional appeals to national glory lose political potency when they fail to deliver promised economic gains or enhanced life opportunities for citizens. By April 2026, Orbán’s attacks on Ukraine and the West, alongside appeals to traditional values, proved insufficient for securing electoral support.

A Georgian domino?

Georgian protestors have maintained street protests for over 470 days; many are hoping to replicate the Hungarian opposition’s triumph. The ruling Georgian Dream party is now serving its fourth consecutive parliamentary term, and its leaders have adopted Orbán’s political blueprint. The party has consolidated control over state institutions, the media, the judiciary, business networks, and local government, while [recently introducing plans to end autonomy in higher education](#). Orbán provided the Georgian leaders intellectual legitimacy and a plan. Georgian Dream’s allegiance to the European right was displayed theatrically every year at the annual Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) conventions in Budapest. At home Georgian prime ministers proclaimed adherence to conservative religious norms over Western values. They emphasized Georgia’s right to “national sovereignty” in opposition to what they characterized as the EU’s distorted liberalism; party members declared themselves to be victims of a conspiratorial “Deep State.” In May 2023, then-Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili addressed CPAC in Budapest. He argued that Georgian Dream’s “main weapon and foundation is traditional, Christian, conservative, family values.” On November 28, 2024, his successor, Irakli Kobakhidze, announced that Georgia would suspend its negotiations on EU accession which sparked massive demonstrations. The state intensified its repressive measures against civil (and largely youthful) resisters in Georgia’s cities.

The Contradictions of Control

Georgian Dream's control over political opposition rests on six pillars: the concentration of power within the ruling elite, including command of the police and the State Security Service (known in Georgia as SUSI); citizens' widespread economic dependence on the state, particularly in rural regions where the government remains the largest employer and provider of social services; control over a monopoly infotainment system, reportedly financed in part by Russian sources which opposition media outlets cannot match; the ability to pass legislation without meaningful resistance in a hollowed-out parliament; a business sector dependent on government contracts and patronage; and the support of the influential conservative Georgian Orthodox Church, which is closely aligned with the Russian Orthodox Church. There are no constraints from an independent middle class, a professional civil service, or an ethical judiciary. A government petition to ban all major opposition parties awaits judgement by the country's Constitutional court. Opposition activists and protesters remain imprisoned, while [Georgian Dream's Foreign Agents Registration Act](#) (FARA), introduced in April 2025, has severely restricted civil society, dissenting academics, and independent media.

Yet Orbán's defeat serves as a reminder that unaccountable oligarchies are not invincible. First of all, Georgian Dream's growing political isolation within its parliamentary stronghold on Rustaveli Avenue has led its leaders to forget the lessons of recent Georgian history. Every major Georgian leader before Bidzina Ivanishvili ultimately fell from power after failing to institutionalize political pluralism or share authority. Today the party opposition in Georgia is barely visible; its absence underlines the government's own responsibility for unemployment and high prices. Public dissatisfaction falls on Georgian Dream itself.

Second, every Georgia ruling party since 1991 has quickly succumbed to corruption. Georgian Dream is no different. No Georgian government has been able to shed Soviet habits of patrimonialism and secrecy which promote and protect corrupt politicians. In Georgia, political and economic power are joined at the hip - lose one, you lose the other. It is too dangerous for the ruling party to disrupt this. Economic reforms might increase party legitimacy, but it's simply too risky and too late for Georgian Dream. The regime emphasizes political stability, but to others, especially Georgian youth, this is equivalent to political stagnation. Finding ways to hold onto power is the only solution for Georgian Dream. Ivanishvili is psychologically unable to share power and politically, in Georgia's polarized environment, concessions to the opposition or to the European Union's pressure for democratic reform, would be perceived as weakness.

Third, Georgia is in poor economic shape, intensified by its self-imposed isolation from Europe. The money the EU provides through loans and grants for infrastructure, education, and business in Georgia has sharply declined. Official Unemployment in Georgia stands at 14 percent, but [overall underemployment remains significantly higher at 50 percent](#). Although official statistics and recent IMF assessments projected GDP growth [at 8-10 percent in early 2026](#), these figures have no meaning in the real economy where most Georgians live. Georgian Dream's messaging of increasing prosperity contradicts the realities of the economy. Georgia has a debt-dependent development model, reliant on foreign capital. This subjects GD to the will of its authoritarian partners, such as China and Turkey, whose willingness to support the country's fragile economy is conditional on their own interests.

Fourth, as Ivan Krastev argues [in his assessment of Orbanism](#), exclusionary regimes like Hungary and Georgia have lost an entire generation. For younger Georgians the ideologically incumbent populists in power look just like the communists. After more than a decade in power, Georgian Dream is associated with privilege, corruption, and ideological exhaustion rather than renewal or reform.

Can the Hungarian Scenario be Replicated?

Hungary offers important lessons to the Georgian opposition, but Georgia is not Hungary. Georgia's party opposition remains fractured despite [establishing a nine-party opposition alliance](#) in early March 2026. Opposition parties have failed to build a broad-based popular front around a nationally recognized leader. The Georgian citizenry is either indifferent or hostile to party activities. There is no coordination between the parties and the street, and opposition party campaigning in the regions, where Georgian Dream has its strongest base, is nonexistent except at election time. The Hungarian opposition's success was a result of unity despite internal differences, a charismatic leader, campaigning in the countryside for over two years *before* the election, a relentless focus on corruption, scandals, and on the decline in the population's living standards. Tisza used social media strategically to mobilize younger voters.

Georgia's party opposition includes courageous leaders, some of whom are currently imprisoned. Yet few appear willing to subordinate their personal authority to a collective opposition movement. The parties' limited resources and weak organizational capacity hinder sustained voter mobilization between elections. This reflects, in part, a traditional disdain for Georgia's rural communities, considered backward by urban elites. The political and economic chasm between the governors and the governed has widened. Most opposition

parties remain neo-liberal and have failed to focus on the issues which count – [poverty, unemployment, prices, and medical costs](#).

Hungary's membership in the EU ensured constrained Orban and the ruling party. Hungarian elections were heavily gerrymandered and structurally unfair, but vote totals -especially given the overwhelming vote against Orban's Fidesz - were difficult to manipulate. The EU, it seems, has enough leverage to prevent its members turning from competitive authoritarianism to outright authoritarianism. That constraint does not apply in Georgia. The EU currently has no strategy for dealing with Georgian democratic decline, and the Georgian government has no incentive to modify its behavior. EU membership would undo Georgian Dream's power. The street opposition in Georgia has persisted – it is practicing democracy, preserving networks, organizing. This is critical, as the Hungarian opposition demonstrated by its active grass roots work. But the demonstrations in Georgia's streets are urban and educated – there is no link to the regions beyond Tbilisi where two thirds of the Georgian population live.

“It's the economy, stupid.”

Opposition emphasis on Georgian Dream's perceived drift toward Russia is politically relevant, but the Hungarian case suggests that more effective targets are the incumbents' corruption scandals, elite malfeasance, and deteriorating economic conditions. Several ministers from Georgian Dream's government, including the former prime minister Gharibashvili [sit in prison for money laundering and abuse of power](#). Georgian Dream's continued survival depends on the repression of the most creative and innovative members of its population (the government's proposed educational restructuring in 2026 which reduces study at school and university by one year is the latest example). But as long as the EU remains disengaged, and the opposition remains disunited, holed up in Tbilisi and inadequately focused on the scandalous levels of poverty and injustice among ordinary Georgians, the Hungarian script cannot be replicated. The opposition, both in party HQs and on the streets, cannot win against Georgian Dream's obvious vulnerabilities until a new leadership emerges with a new and effective strategy.

¹. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 52–65.