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Foreign Policy Narratives and Electoral Strategy: A Study
of Party Dynamics in the 2024 Georgian Parliamentary
Election

MA Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines how political parties in Georgia used foreign policy narratives during the 2024 parliamentary election campaign. The study focuses on how these narratives were framed and what goals they served in a highly polarised political environment. Using a constructivist theoretical approach and framing theory as the main analytical tool, the research analyses how five political parties or coalitions—Georgian Dream, Coalition for Change, Unity – National Movement, Strong Georgia, and For Georgia—constructed and communicated their messages between May and October 2024.

The study is based on qualitative content analysis of party manifestos, public speeches, statements, and interviews, mainly gathered from official websites and Facebook pages. It identifies five main types of frames: diagnostic, prognostic and competency, motivational, delegitimation, and identity frames. The findings show that foreign policy was often linked with domestic issues, especially questions of national identity, political legitimacy, and peace versus conflict. Opposition parties frequently framed Georgian Dream as being aligned with Russia, while the ruling party presented itself as the only force capable of ensuring peace and protecting traditional values. The study offers a detailed picture of how foreign policy was used in public messaging. The research contributes to understanding political competition in small states and shows how external policy can become central to domestic electoral politics.

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Introduction

Foreign policy rarely decides elections in major powers like the US or France. In smaller frontline states like Georgia, however, it can become a central campaign issue. Georgia is one such case. Since gaining independence in 1991, the country has aimed to “rejoin the European family,” even while facing intense pressure from its much larger northern neighbour, Russia. In 2024, these tensions were especially vivid: Russian troops still occupied the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Ukraine was fighting a full-scale war, and international partners in Brussels and Washington were watching Georgia’s democratic process closely. In this climate, parties did more than offer routine policy proposals; instead, they advanced competing narratives about national identity, external threats, and Georgia’s foreign-policy direction.

This thesis asks how Georgian political parties constructed and used foreign-policy narratives during the October 2024 parliamentary campaign. The question is important for several reasons. First, it highlights the domestic side of foreign policy in a small state – an aspect often overlooked in research. Second, it applies a standard framing approach (identifying problems, proposing solutions, and calls to action) to foreign-policy communication in an election campaign. Third, it provides systematic evidence on Georgia’s sharp political polarisation during the campaign, a trend widely noted but not yet deeply analysed.

The study is grounded in a constructivist approach to international relations. From this perspective, foreign policy is shaped by shared ideas and meanings, not just by material interests. Framing theory fits this view: it explains how political actors highlight certain aspects of reality to influence how people interpret issues and decide to act. Framing can be especially powerful in a contested election campaign, where appeals to values and identity often matter as much as – or more than – detailed policy arguments.

Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative single-case design focused on Georgia’s October 2024 election. The primary data include party manifestos, leaders’ speeches and debate transcripts, press releases, and social media posts from May 2024 through election day. A codebook with five frame categories guides the analysis. These categories are: diagnostic frames (identifying problems and blaming actors); solution or competence frames (proposing policies or actions and claiming

the ability to implement them); motivational frames (calls to action); delegitimation frames (attacking opponents); and identity frames (defining “us” versus “them”). The data are coded manually. Process tracing is also used to follow how these narratives shifted after major events in the campaign.

The comparison focuses on five parties or coalitions that won seats in the election. These are the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) and four opposition forces: Coalition for Change (CfC), Unity – National Movement (UNM), Strong Georgia coalition (SG), and Gakharia’s new party, For Georgia (FG). GD ran as the incumbent; the others, including two newly formed coalitions, each presented a distinct foreign-policy identity and sought to challenge their rivals. By studying these actors, the thesis captures the main divisions in Georgian politics during this campaign.

The thesis is organised as follows. Chapter 1 sets the theoretical framework, drawing on constructivism, political narratives, and framing theory. Chapter 2 describes the research design, case selection, data collection methods, coding rules, and the study’s limitations. Chapter 3 presents the empirical findings, organised by frame category, with illustrative quotations from the original Georgian. Chapter 4 discusses the implications of these findings for Georgian politics and the study of foreign policy in small states, and it offers concluding thoughts and suggestions for future research.

By examining how parties used terms such as NATO, the EU, Russia, sovereignty, and “peace versus war” to compete for votes, this study arrives at one core claim: in a small state like Georgia, foreign policy is not merely an external matter but a central part of domestic political identity.

Part 1 - Theoretical framework: Framing Theory and Political Discourse

Origins and Development of Framing Theory

Framing theory emerged in the social sciences as a way to explain how people *organise and interpret* information. The concept traces back to sociologist Erving Goffman, who in **Frame Analysis** (1974) described frames as “schemata of interpretation” that allow individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label events in their lives. In other words, a frame is a cognitive structure or mental schema that helps people make sense of the world by highlighting certain aspects of reality while filtering out others. Goffman’s work laid the foundation by showing that our understanding of any situation depends on the interpretive frame the study applies.

Building on Goffman’s ideas, scholars in the 1980s introduced framing into the study of social movements and political communication. Collective action framing in sociology, notably advanced by David Snow and Robert Benford, emphasised that social movement leaders actively craft interpretive frames to mobilise support and shape shared meanings. Snow and Benford’s work demonstrated that framing is an intentional process of meaning-making: movement actors define what problem needs addressing, who or what is to blame, and what action should be taken. This highlighted that frames are not static “beliefs” but dynamic interpretive packages that help to align individuals’ understanding with a movement’s cause.

By the 1990s, framing theory had become integral to political communication research. Communication scholars like Robert Entman formalised the concept for media and politics. Entman (1993) defined framing as selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text” in order to promote “a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”. In practical terms, framing in communication involves emphasising certain information to influence how audiences interpret an issue. For example, in media coverage or political speeches, framing might mean stressing national security over civil liberties (or vice versa) when discussing a policy, thereby guiding the public to a preferred interpretation. Since Entman’s seminal work, numerous studies have elaborated how

frames function in news reporting, political speeches, and other arenas of public discourse (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Chong & Druckman, 2007). This body of research firmly established framing theory as a theoretical framework (not just a method) for understanding how meaning is constructed and communicated in the political realm.

In sum, the origins of framing theory span sociology and political communication. Goffman provided the foundational idea of interpretive frames in everyday life. Snow and Benford showed how activists leverage frames to shape collective understanding, and communication scholars like Entman applied framing to media and politics with clear definitions and analytical tools. Together, these developments frame (so to speak) our understanding of how political actors and communicators actively structure reality through discourse.

Framing, Meaning Construction, and Contested Discourse

At its core, framing is a process of meaning construction. It is not simply about what topic is being discussed, but *how* it is being discussed. Frames imbue events and facts with interpretation: they tell us *what is happening* and *why it matters*. By emphasising certain aspects of an issue and linking them to familiar narratives or values, frames shape the meaning that audiences take away. This means that political realities are not objectively “given” to the public; they are constructed through interpretive frames that highlight some elements of reality over others.

In political discourse, meaning is often contested. Different actors will promote competing frames for the same issue, each seeking to define the situation in their own favour. For instance, a policy debate on economic reform could be framed by one party as “fostering opportunity” and by another as “threatening security,” each interpretation resonating with different values and leading the public to divergent conclusions. Importantly, frames do more than define problems and solutions – they also implicitly define roles and identities. Some scholars note, that frames can characterise “heroes” or “villains” in a given story and what is at stake. In other words, framing helps determine *who* is seen as responsible, *what* is seen as good or bad, and *how* an issue connects to broader morals.

Because political meaning is up for grabs, framing involves an inherent contest of narratives. In pluralistic democracies, especially during heated election periods, multiple frames collide as

politicians, parties, and media compete to impose their preferred definitions of reality. Each side tries to make its frame *the* dominant interpretation, while undermining the frames of opponents. This dynamic is sometimes described as a “framing contest,” highlighting that political communication is as much about battling over meaning as it is about conveying information. Research in political psychology suggests that the effects of any one frame can be moderated by the presence of alternative or counter-frames – essentially, competition among ideas is characteristic of democratic discourse. In highly polarised contexts, these framing battles intensify. Polarisation often means there is little common ground on which to interpret events, so opposing parties put forward starkly different frames that rarely overlap. The result is a discursive environment where citizens are presented with contrasting narratives of the same reality, contributing to divergent perceptions along partisan lines.

In summary, framing theory illuminates how political discourse is an active process of constructing and contesting meaning. Rather than treating political statements as neutral descriptions, framing directs our attention to *how* language and presentation shape what issues mean to people. This perspective is crucial for understanding campaigns and conflicts in interpretation, especially when political stakes are high and actors deliberately *compete* to define the situation in ways advantageous to themselves.

Framing in Political Communication and Campaigns

Framing is a strategic tool in the hands of political actors, particularly evident in election campaigns. During campaigns, politicians and parties are not only proposing policies – they are also vying to control the narrative surrounding those policies. By framing issues in specific ways, parties attempt to make their preferred interpretation *resonate* with voters and to cast themselves in a positive light (while often casting opponents in a negative light). As Druckman (2001) argues, frames work by highlighting specific considerations and values, which in turn make particular political choices seem more appealing or logical to the public. In this sense, framing is an act of persuasion: it guides voters on *how to think about* a given issue, not by changing the facts but by altering the context and emphasis.

A classic function of campaign framing is identity building. Parties use frames to connect political issues with questions of *who we are* as a community or nation. For example, a party might frame a foreign policy stance in terms of national pride or cultural identity, such as portraying support for a certain alliance as evidence of being “truly European” or, conversely, defending a policy as preserving “traditional Georgian values.” These identity frames tie policy positions to voters’ sense of self and core values, making the political debate about *belonging* and *values*, not just technical policy details. Research by de Vreese (2005) finds that identity-related frames are especially powerful when they align with the audience’s pre-existing beliefs and cultural narratives, because people more readily accept interpretations that feel culturally familiar. In the Georgian context, frames invoking “being part of Europe” versus “defending Georgian traditions” exemplify this strategy, connecting foreign policy preferences to deeper questions of national identity.

Another key aspect of framing in campaigns is making legitimacy claims – and, by extension, delegitimising opponents. Political communication often involves framing opponents as unfit or dangerous, undermining their credibility. This occurs through what Ruth Wodak (2015) calls the “*politics of fear*.” Parties will frame their rivals as threats to the nation’s values or security, essentially casting them as malevolent actors in the political story. In Georgia’s polarised elections, for instance, a common framing tactic is to accuse opponents of being “pro-Russian” (implying they threaten national sovereignty) or “anti-Georgian,” which paints them as traitorous or aligned with dangerous foreign interests. Such frames tap into patriotic sentiment and historical fears, seeking to delegitimise the opponent’s trustworthiness. On the other hand, parties frame themselves as guardians of legitimacy – e.g., defenders of the nation, protectors of peace, or champions of the people’s true will. All these framing efforts serve to bolster one’s own standing as the *most credible* and morally right choice in the election.

Framing in campaigns also often manifests through stark narrative conflicts. Especially in a polarised environment, each party constructs a narrative in which it is the hero and the other side is the villain. For example, during the 2024 campaign in Georgia, the ruling party, *Georgian Dream*, visually and rhetorically framed itself as the keeper of stability and peace. In one notable instance, Georgian Dream’s campaign materials used images of war-torn Ukrainian cities to drive home the narrative that supporting the ruling party meant avoiding a similar fate for Georgia. The opposition, in this frame, was portrayed as “warmongers” who would plunge the country into

conflict. The opposition parties, of course, countered with their own frames – for instance, framing Georgian Dream as too conciliatory to Russia or betraying national interests. This back-and-forth exemplifies what Chong and Druckman (2007) describe as *emphasis framing*, where each side highlights one dimension of an issue (peace vs. resistance, patriotism vs. capitulation, etc.) to make their case. Each narrative accentuates certain facts and values (e.g. peace versus justice, or security versus sovereignty) to sway public opinion.

Crucially, these framing strategies are not arbitrary; they draw on cultural resonance and context. Effective political frames often echo existing public sentiments, historical experiences, or widely held values. As Van Gorp (2007) notes, frames must connect with cultural narratives to truly stick. In Georgia, the historical memory of Soviet domination and the ongoing debate over alignment with the West provide a rich backdrop that parties invoke in their frames. Accusations like “pro-Russian” gain traction because they resonate with the collective memory of Russian interference, while slogans about “European family” resonate with popular aspirations toward European integration. By tapping into these deeper narratives, parties make their frames more emotionally charged and credible to the electorate.

In summary, framing in political campaigns is a deliberate practice of shaping interpretation and perception. Parties highlight selective aspects of complex issues, link those aspects to identity and values, and thereby guide voters toward viewing one side as legitimate and the other as suspect. Far from neutral, this process is competitive and charged: campaigns become battles of frames in which each party strives to define the reality voters will believe. Understanding these framing battles is essential to unpacking how campaigns influence public opinion beyond mere policy promises.

Framing Theory and Constructivist Perspectives in IR

Framing theory’s focus on meaning-making aligns closely with constructivist international relations (IR) theories. Constructivism in IR argues that global political realities are not simply determined by material forces (like military power or economic resources), but are socially constructed through ideas, norms, identities, and discourse. In other words, how political actors perceive “interests” and “threats” depends on interpretations – who they think they are, who they

consider friends or foes, and what narratives they believe about the world. This worldview provides an ontological foundation for using framing in a foreign policy context. If foreign policy debates are fundamentally about competing ideas and identities, then analysing the frames used in those debates is key to understanding them.

From a constructivist perspective, *foreign policy narratives* are a prime example of social construction at work. States and political actors define their interests and identities by telling stories about themselves and others. Framing theory offers a practical lens to study how those stories are constructed and communicated. For instance, constructivist scholars like Ted Hopf and Alexander Wendt have shown that national interests are shaped by historical narratives and collective identities, not just objective facts (e.g., Hopf, 1998; Wendt, 1999). Framing theory builds on this insight by examining how political actors *package* those narratives for public consumption. Frames are, in effect, the building blocks of the larger narratives that construct a political reality. They distil abstract ideas about “who we are” or “what we want” into digestible, persuasive messages during political communication.

Consider how identity and threat construction happen through framing. A government might frame an international issue in terms of national identity (“this agreement aligns with Georgia’s European identity”) or, conversely, frame it as a threat to that identity (“closer ties with X country betray who we are as Georgians”). These are not just rhetoric – they actively shape what counts as a legitimate or illegitimate foreign policy choice. Scholars like Ronald Krebs have argued that narratives allow political actors to make claims about national identity, history, and purpose. When those narratives are condensed into campaign frames, they become powerful political tools: they tell the public what *role* their nation is playing on the world stage (e.g., victim, aspiring EU member, regional leader) and what is at stake in foreign policy decisions.

Furthermore, constructivism emphasises that meaning is always contested. Political actors continuously vie to impose their preferred interpretations of events. Jennifer Milliken (1999), for example, highlighted how discourse is central to creating what is seen as real or true in international politics. Framing theory provides a way to analyse this contestation in practice. When Georgian leaders debate foreign policy, their frames might conflict – one side framing a policy as “pragmatic engagement,” while another frames the same policy as “dangerous appeasement.”

These clashing frames reflect deeper contests over identity (e.g. “pro-West” vs. “pro-Russia” orientations) and values. In the 2024 Georgian elections, such contests were evident: the ruling party’s “peace narrative” (framing their stance as keeping Georgia safe and neutral) was challenged by opposition frames that labeled it as *weakness* or *capitulation*, whereas the opposition’s pro-Ukraine, pro-West stance was framed by the government as *reckless* and *war-provoking*. This constant framing and reframing of foreign policy positions illustrates the constructivist idea that identities and interests are not fixed – they are *battlegrounds of meaning* that political actors fight over.

In short, integrating framing theory with a constructivist IR approach allows us to see the connection between macro-level narratives about a nation’s place in the world and micro-level communication tactics in political discourse. Constructivism provides insight into the idea that ideas and identities matter in foreign policy, and framing theory gives us the analytical toolkit to study how those ideas and identities are wielded and contested in real time. This synergy makes framing an ideal theoretical framework for analysing foreign policy discourse, as it bridges high-level theoretical concepts (like identity, norms, and narrative) with concrete analysis of campaign messages and speeches.

Framing the 2024 Georgian Elections: A Suitable Lens

Having outlined framing theory, we can now see why it is especially well suited to the puzzle at the heart of this thesis: how Georgian political parties constructed foreign policy narratives during the 2024 parliamentary elections. The election campaign in Georgia was characterised by intense polarisation and a battle over the country’s geopolitical orientation, making it a textbook case for framing analysis. Three features of this case underscore the relevance of framing theory:

- **Meaning Construction in a Polarised Context:** The 2024 campaign saw political actors actively constructing opposing meanings around foreign policy issues. Rather than a single consensus narrative, there were duelling interpretations – for example, was pursuing closer ties with the West a guarantee of security or a provocation of Russia? Each camp framed the issue to fit its narrative. Framing theory directly addresses this phenomenon by focusing on how political meaning is constructed and contested. It allows us to dissect the

interpretive packaging behind each side's messages. This is vital in a polarised election, where voters are effectively presented with two different "realities." Using framing as an analytical lens enables us to understand the content of those realities – the specific language, symbols, and emphases that made one narrative feel true to one group of voters and another narrative persuasive to another group.

- **Salience of Certain Issues over Others:** During the Georgian elections, certain foreign policy topics became flashpoints of debate (e.g. relations with Russia, stance on NATO/EU), while others faded into the background. Framing theory helps explain this selective spotlight. As Entman (1993) noted, to frame is to *make some aspect of reality more salient* in a communicating text. Georgian parties strategically elevated some issues and ignored others to serve their campaign strategy. For instance, the ruling party might downplay topics like internal democratic reforms but heavily feature the theme of "peace with Russia," framing it as the paramount concern for voters. The opposition, conversely, might amplify the issue of European integration while marginalising discussions that don't serve their narrative. By applying framing theory, we can analyse *why* those particular issues rose to prominence – essentially, how parties' frames competed to define what the election was "about." This reveals the power of framing in setting agendas and focusing public attention on certain foreign policy questions (and not on others).
- **Delegitimation and Identity Battles:** The Georgian campaign was not just a polite debate on policy – it was a struggle over *legitimacy and national identity*. Accusations flew on all sides: politicians accused their rivals of being "Russian agents," "Western puppets," "traitors," and other charged labels. These weren't random insults; they were carefully crafted frames aimed at delegitimising opponents. Framing theory is an ideal tool to dissect these tactics. It posits that such labels are part of broader frames that define who is a patriot and who is a threat. By examining the use of delegitimising frames (e.g., calling someone *anti-national* or implying they endanger the country), the study gains insight into how political actors seek to erode the credibility of their foes while bolstering their own. In Georgia's 2024 elections, this was a defining feature of the discourse – each side drew symbolic boundaries between "true patriots" and "dangerous others". Framing theory

guides us to identify those boundaries and understand the narratives behind them (for example, one narrative casting the ruling party as the sole guardian of the nation and the opposition as destabilising agents, and the counter-narrative doing the reverse).

Ultimately, framing theory provides a coherent framework to tie all these observations together. It allows us to see the election campaign as a contest of frames, where foreign policy issues became vessels for larger stories about identity, loyalty, and direction for the country. This perspective is especially powerful given Georgia's context: a small state navigating between great powers (Russia and the West), with a history of information wars and propaganda. In such an environment, *how* a foreign policy issue is framed can be just as consequential as the policy itself. By applying framing theory, the study can systematically analyse the content of party communications – their slogans, speeches, program statements – to reveal the underlying patterns of meaning-making. The researcher can ask: What frames did each party use to define Georgia's foreign policy choices? How did those frames resonate with or challenge historical narratives and public sentiments? And how did the interaction of those frames shape the tone and outcome of the electoral contest?

In conclusion, framing theory is not merely a methodological tool for coding texts; it is a theoretical lens that sheds light on the construction of political reality. By providing concepts to understand *selection*, *emphasis*, and *salience* in communication, framing theory helps explain why political discourse takes the shape it does, especially in a high-stakes, polarised election like Georgia's in 2024. It illuminates the ways in which political parties build identities, claim legitimacy, and engage in narrative conflict through their communication strategies. In the chapters that follow, this theoretical framework will guide the analysis, ensuring that the study pays attention to the subtle yet powerful ways in which language and interpretation influenced Georgia's foreign policy debate during the election. The use of framing theory thus strengthens our ability to answer the thesis's central question about foreign policy narratives and electoral strategy, providing a bridge between abstract theoretical insights and the concrete empirical examination of Georgia's 2024 campaign discourse.

Part 2 - Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to understand how Georgian political parties constructed and employed foreign policy narratives during the 2024 parliamentary election campaign. The main research question guiding the analysis is: **How did Georgian political parties use foreign policy narratives during the 2024 election campaign to appeal to voters and delegitimise their rivals?** In particular, the study also examines how parties responded to criticism and delegitimation efforts from their opponents in the course of the campaign. Rather than measuring the popularity or electoral impact of specific policy positions, the focus is on uncovering how parties communicated foreign policy issues, how they framed themselves and their rivals in relation to the international environment, and how these discourses were used to signal legitimacy, identity alignment, or opposition. In line with constructivist theory and framing theory, political discourse is treated not as a reflection of fixed preferences but as a site where meaning is actively constructed and contested.

The research follows a single-case study approach, centred on the Georgian 2024 parliamentary elections. A case study is well-suited for examining how broader international and domestic developments are interpreted and framed in a specific context (Yin, 2018). This design allows for in-depth analysis of textual and narrative material across the campaign timeline and across different parties. The goal is not to produce a universally generalisable model, but to generate rich, context-specific insights into the role of foreign policy narratives in a polarised and geopolitically sensitive electoral environment. The approach is theory-guided (drawing on framing concepts) but remains open to inductive insights that emerge from the data. The interpretive nature of the design prioritises depth and nuance over breadth, which is appropriate given the complex interplay of domestic politics and foreign policy in this case.

Case Selection

The selected case is the **2024 parliamentary election in Georgia**. This election provides a compelling context for study because it took place amid heightened international tensions –

notably the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, strained relations between the EU and Georgia, and widespread allegations of democratic backsliding by the Georgian government. In this environment, foreign policy issues became unusually prominent in campaign discourse, as parties linked domestic political themes with narratives about Georgia’s geopolitical orientation. The 2024 campaign, therefore, offers a unique opportunity to examine how political actors in a transitional democracy leverage foreign policy narratives to pursue domestic power.

Within this case, five political parties or coalitions were selected for analysis based on their performance in the 2024 elections. Each of these actors surpassed the 5% vote threshold to secure representation in parliament, ensuring that the study focuses on parties with significant public support and political relevance. The selected parties are: **Georgian Dream** (the ruling party), **Coalition for Change, Unity – National Movement**, **Strong Georgia** (coalition), and **Gakharia for Georgia**. This selection captures both ruling and opposition forces and includes ideologically distinct groupings, thus providing variation in political positioning, foreign policy orientation, and rhetorical style. Focusing on these major competitors enables a comparative look at narrative construction across key cleavages in Georgian politics (government vs. opposition, pro-West vs. pro-Russia leanings, etc.).

The analysis concentrates on the public campaign communications of these five actors during the core campaign period from May 2024 until election day in late October 2024. This timeframe covers the lead-up to the official campaign, when parties began shaping their messages, through the peak campaign season right before the vote. It is during this interval that parties not only promoted their platforms but also reacted to events and attacks from rivals. By limiting the scope to this six-month window, the study captures the campaign narratives at their most intense, while acknowledging that it does not encompass discourse before or after the election season.

Data Collection

To examine how parties constructed and communicated their foreign policy narratives, the study relies on a variety of publicly available textual materials produced by the five selected parties during the campaign period. The data collection strategy is document-based and focuses on primary sources that directly reflect each party’s official messaging. The corpus includes the

following types of materials (in the original Georgian, with translations used for analysis as needed):

- **Election programs and party manifestos:** Formal documents outlining each party's policy positions and declared foreign policy orientations, providing a baseline for their narrative goals.
- **Public speeches and televised debates by party leaders:** Transcripts or recordings of speeches, campaign rallies, and any debates or TV appearances, which show how leaders framed international developments and presented their foreign policy stance to the public.
- **Press releases and official statements:** Communications issued by party organisations or spokespeople (e.g. statements responding to events or accusations), which often highlight the party's framing of ongoing issues.
- **Social media posts by parties and leaders:** Content from official party accounts and the personal Facebook pages of top candidates. Facebook was a particularly important platform for political messaging in Georgia, so posts and videos shared there form a key part of the data.
- **Interviews and media appearances:** Any interviews or Q&A sessions in which party representatives discussed foreign policy themes (as available), giving insight into how narratives were conveyed in a question-and-answer setting.

All these materials were gathered primarily through the parties' official websites and Facebook pages or other official channels. In the Georgian context, Facebook serves as the dominant social media platform for political communication, far outstripping other networks in usage and influence. The total number of Facebook users, as well as its ad reach in Georgia, far exceeds its counterparts (Kemp, 2025). Facebook is an essential arena for Georgian politics: political campaigns are fought mainly on this platform, and public opinion is often shaped there. Given this reality, the parties and coalitions studied here post most of their campaign content on Facebook,

making it an accessible repository of their communications. The study collected speeches, statements, and even TV interview clips if they were shared through these official social media pages or linked on party websites.

The emphasis on party-affiliated sources ensures that the discourse analysed is directly attributable to the parties themselves. Third-party commentary, journalistic reports, or media editorials were excluded *unless* a party explicitly endorsed or circulated such content as part of its message. By focusing on party-originated texts, the study ensures it is capturing each party's intended framing rather than a media filter. This approach aligns with established qualitative discourse analysis practices, where public documents and speeches are treated as valid representations of political meaning-making (Schreier, 2012; Bowen, 2009). Moreover, collecting materials from multiple channels (manifestos, speeches, social media posts, etc.) allows for triangulation across different formats, increasing the robustness of the findings.

It should be noted that Georgia's traditional media landscape is highly partisan, with major television networks often aligned either with the ruling party or the opposition, leaving little neutral space for balanced debate (de Waal, n.d.). In such a polarised media environment, political actors frequently bypass traditional media and communicate directly with the public via social media. Facebook, in particular, offers parties a direct and widely accessible outlet to disseminate their narratives without mediation by hostile or oppositional outlets. This context further justifies why our data collection focused on social media and official party communications: to capture the narratives as they were presented to citizens in an unfiltered form. All source materials were collected in the original Georgian language, and relevant excerpts were translated into English for analysis and reporting. The researcher's fluency in Georgian ensured that nuances (idioms, tone, cultural references) were understood during coding and that translations of quotes accurately reflected the intended meaning.

Data Analysis

The analysis employs a qualitative content analysis approach guided by framing theory, within a constructivist view of political narratives. The central analytical goal is to identify *how foreign policy issues were framed* by the parties – in other words, what meanings were attached to

international themes, which actors were blamed or praised, what solutions were proposed, and what values or identities were invoked. The framing framework builds on the classic typology of Benford and Snow (2000), who outlined three core components of collective action frames. However, for the purposes of this research, that typology was extended to five frame categories in order to capture the full range of campaign messaging observed. Each collected document or communication was treated as a unit of analysis and coded according to the presence of the following frame types:

- **Diagnostic frames:** Statements that identify a problem or threat and attribute blame for it. (For example, a party highlighting an economic crisis or security threat and pinning the responsibility on a specific actor or policy failure would be using a diagnostic frame.)
- **Prognostic frames:** Statements that propose a solution, policy, or course of action to address the identified problem. This includes outlining what should be done or how things should be changed.
- **Motivational frames:** Appeals that provide a rationale for action or mobilisation, often through moral justifications or emotional appeals. These frames are meant to inspire supporters, urging them to vote, volunteer, or otherwise act (e.g. “Now is the time to defend our country’s future”).
- **Identity frames:** Statements that define the identity of the party or its supporters in relation to the issue, often by delineating an “us” versus “them.” Identity frames link the political message to collective identity, portraying the party as representing certain values or a vision of the nation, typically in opposition to some adversary with different values. For instance, a party might frame itself as the true guardian of Georgian sovereignty or European identity, implicitly contrasting with an opponent cast as unpatriotic or “other.” (The identity component of framing helps create an oppositional consciousness by defining the “we” against a “they” with different values.)
- **Delegitimation frames:** Communications aimed at undermining an opponent’s legitimacy or credibility. These frames often involve direct attacks, accusations, or negative labelling

- portraying the rival as corrupt, disloyal, dangerous, or otherwise unfit to hold office. Delegitimation frames were common in this campaign, for example, through accusations of “treasonous” behaviour or insinuations that opponents were agents of foreign influence.

In practice, these framing categories were operationalised with specific coding criteria. During content analysis, the researcher noted whenever a piece of text performed one of the above functions. A single communication could contain multiple frames; for example, a speech might simultaneously blame the opposition for a problem (diagnostic), tout the speaker’s own policy fix (prognostic), and call on voters to support them to save the country’s future (motivational), while also casting the contest as a battle between patriots and traitors (identity and delegitimation). Therefore, coding involved identifying and recording *all* frames present in each unit of analysis. Each text was read closely in its entirety and coded manually by tagging segments or quotes that exemplified one or more of the five frame types. The coding process was iterative and interpretive: the researcher moved back and forth between the data and the frame definitions, allowing new themes or nuances to emerge inductively while still applying the consistent frame categories as a guide (Saldaña, 2016). All coded excerpts were compiled with their associated frame labels, and illustrative quotations were extracted for each frame type. This created a basis for comparing framing patterns across different parties and communication formats.

Importantly, beyond identifying frames in isolation, the analysis also considered framing dynamics and narrative interplay. The Georgian 2024 campaign was highly adversarial, so the study looked at how framing was used in the interactive context of political contestation. In coding, special attention was paid to instances where a party’s message explicitly responded to or was shaped by an opponent’s actions, criticisms, or attacks. For example, if the ruling party attempted to delegitimise an opposition group by tying them to a foreign adversary, the opposition’s subsequent communications were examined for how they rebutted that claim or counter-framed the ruling party in return. By tracing these exchanges, the analysis captures how parties responded to delegitimation attempts and criticism from their rivals through frame adjustment or counter-frames. This dynamic approach goes beyond a static content catalogue; it examines framing as an evolving process of claim and counter-claim. It also incorporates the influence of external developments: when major real-world events or international criticisms occurred during the

campaign, the analysis notes how parties adapted their frames in response (for instance, integrating news of sanctions or international statements into their narratives). In sum, rather than simply mapping frames at one point in time, the study explores how framing contests unfolded over the course of the campaign, revealing how narratives were reinforced, challenged, or shifted when confronted with opponent counter-messaging or new events.

All qualitative coding was conducted manually by the researcher. This decision was made to ensure close engagement with the text and sensitivity to context-specific language that an automated approach might miss. Georgian political language can involve metaphors, historical allusions, or irony that require interpretive understanding. Manual coding allowed the researcher to account for these subtleties, such as the tone of a phrase or the implication behind a cultural reference. The dataset size was sufficiently manageable to make manual analysis feasible, and doing so helped maintain flexibility in how codes were applied to nuanced passages. Throughout the process, the researcher practised reflexivity – continually revisiting interpretations and keeping memos on coding decisions – to mitigate subjective bias as much as possible. The result of the analysis is a structured characterisation of each party’s use of frames, supplemented by examples, and an account of how these framing strategies interacted within the broader narrative conflict of the campaign.

Empirical Expectations

Prior to conducting the empirical analysis, the researcher formulated several expectations about what patterns were likely to emerge from the data. These empirical expectations were informed by the theoretical framework and the known context of Georgian politics. They were not formal hypotheses to be tested with strict metrics, but rather anticipations of prevalent themes and dynamics that the analysis would likely observe:

- **Pervasive delegitimation:** It was expected that a significant portion of the campaign discourse would consist of attempts by each side to delegitimise the other. Given Georgia’s polarised political climate, both the ruling party and the opposition were anticipated to frequently cast their rivals as *illegitimate*, *untrustworthy*, or even *dangerous* to the nation. The researcher anticipated finding numerous instances of negative framing, such as

accusations of corruption, disloyalty to the country, or ties to undesirable foreign actors, used to undermine opponents' credibility.

- **Identity-based appeals:** The researcher expected extensive use of identity frames linking domestic political choices to broader civilisational or national alignments. In the context of Georgia's East–West geopolitical tug-of-war, campaign messages were likely to invoke themes of national identity, patriotism, and cultural values. For example, parties were expected to portray themselves as defenders of “true” Georgian identity or as champions of the country's European destiny, while painting opponents as representing the “other” (whether that be Russian influence, un-Georgian values, or betrayal of national interests). Such identity framing would connect the foreign policy stance with voters' sense of who “we” are as a nation.
- **Ruling party vs. opposition framing differences:** It was anticipated that the framing strategies of the incumbent ruling party (Georgian Dream) and the main opposition groups would diverge in line with their political needs. The ruling party was expected to emphasise *prognostic* and *motivational* frames that highlight stability, continuity, and its role as the guarantor of national well-being – for instance, framing itself as ensuring peace and prosperity while warning voters against the chaos that opposition victory might bring. It was also expected to deploy delegitimation frames portraying the opposition as irresponsible or even traitorous (for example, accusing them of stirring unrest or being aligned with hostile foreign interests). Conversely, opposition parties were expected to employ strong *diagnostic* frames to blame the incumbent for policy failures and democratic backsliding, and to use delegitimising narratives of their own, casting the ruling party as corrupt, authoritarian, or secretly serving Kremlin interests. In their prognostic framing, opposition groups were anticipated to present themselves as the *pro-Western reformist* alternative that would restore Georgia's Euro-Atlantic course and true democracy. In sum, each side was expected to frame itself as the saviour of Georgia's future while depicting the other as a threat to the nation.

- **Foreign policy as a proxy for broader issues:** Based on the context, the researcher expected that foreign policy topics would often be intertwined with domestic themes and used as proxies in the political debate. Rather than abstract discussions of foreign relations, references to the EU, NATO, Russia, or other international actors would likely serve a domestic framing purpose. For example, an expectation was that pro-Western foreign policy narratives (such as promises of EU integration or alignment with Western values) would be used to signal a party’s democratic credentials and modernising agenda at home. Similarly, accusations involving Russia or “Russian-style” governance would be used to taint opponents as anti-Western or anti-Georgian. Essentially, the prediction was that framing of foreign policy would reflect internal cleavages: “Europe” versus “Russia” as symbols for two different futures for Georgia. The campaign was expected to show evidence of these symbolic narratives, with parties leveraging foreign policy stances to bolster their legitimacy or attack their rivals.

These anticipated patterns provided a heuristic lens at the outset of the research. They guided the initial coding focus, for instance, ensuring attentiveness to any occurrence of delegitimising language or identity-laden rhetoric. However, the analysis remained open to findings that might contradict or nuance these expectations. The actual prevalence and interplay of frames (diagnostic, prognostic, motivational, identity, delegitimation) were determined by systematic coding of the data. The expectations above were largely borne out of Georgia’s recent political history and the scholarly understanding of framing in competitive politics; the subsequent results chapter would reveal the extent to which the campaign discourse aligned with or deviated from these pre-study expectations.

Limitations of the Study

Like any case study, this research has certain limitations stemming from its scope and methodology. First, focusing on a single country, one campaign, and a six-month window means that the findings are context-specific. Examining Georgia’s 2024 election in depth yields rich insights into how foreign-policy stories were woven into that particular electoral battle, but it also narrows the view. Patterns identified in this study should therefore be seen as hypotheses or

informed observations rather than universally applicable rules (Yin, 2018). The discourse captured is confined to what parties *publicly communicated* between May and October 2024. The analysis says little about how the same parties discussed foreign policy before the campaign heated up or after the election, nor can it account for behind-the-scenes strategy. Important influences on campaign narratives – such as private discussions, internal polling, focus group feedback, or pressures from donors and international partners – fall outside the scope of the publicly available materials analysed here. Document-based research is a well-tested strategy for studying communication (Bowen, 2009), but it inherently omits the hidden dimension of message-crafting that is not visible in published statements. Additionally, larger parties produced far more content than smaller ones, meaning the dataset is uneven. Even though the collection aimed to be comprehensive for each party, the sheer volume of Georgian Dream’s communications, for example, exceeds that of a minor coalition, which could bias the analysis toward narratives of the more vocal actors. Efforts were made to sample and balance the material, but differences in visibility and media coverage cannot be fully eliminated.

A second set of limitations relates to interpretation and language. All sources were initially in Georgian and were translated into English for the purposes of analysis and presentation. There is the familiar risk that some meanings (especially idioms, humour, or cultural references) do not fully carry over in translation (Temple & Young, 2004). While the researcher is a native Georgian speaker and took care to convey the true sense of quotes in English, subtle connotations might still be lost or dulled in the process. Furthermore, the coding of frames was done by a single researcher. This manual, interpretive coding approach – favouring close reading over mechanical consistency – introduces a degree of subjective judgment. Although guided by theoretical definitions and conducted with careful reflexivity (Saldaña, 2016), the categorisation of a given statement as, say, an identity frame or a motivational frame sometimes required interpretation. Another researcher might have coded a few borderline cases differently. That said, the clear definitions of the five frame types and multiple rounds of reviewing the coded data were used to enhance consistency. Finally, when dealing with social media content, there is an added layer of uncertainty: algorithms may have influenced which posts were widely seen, and some posts or comments might have been deleted or edited by the authors after publication (leaving no accessible record). The dataset is thus a snapshot of the visible record as obtained during the research period. These factors create some blind spots that cannot be entirely overcome. Recognising such limitations, the study exercises

caution in its conclusions, aiming to *map out* how parties framed foreign policy in the campaign and to offer reasoned interpretations of those patterns, rather than claiming to assess the truthfulness or impact of the narratives definitively. Despite the constraints, the methodology provides a systematic and transparent way to analyse the campaign's discursive battles, laying the groundwork for further research and comparative analysis in the future.

Part 3 - Analysis and findings

3.1 Case Background

Party System and Key Electoral Actors

Georgia's political arena is deeply polarised. Georgian Dream (GD) was founded and funded by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Together with the United National Movement (UNM), it stands at the opposite pole, forcing newer actors to court undecided voters caught in between (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2023). GD's 2012–2013 victory delivered the first peaceful transfer of power since independence (Nodia, 2014). The party initially upheld Euro-Atlantic integration, signing an Association Agreement and DCFTA with the EU in 2014. It later secured visa-free Schengen travel for Georgians in 2017 (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2020).

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, GD leaders adopted a more Eurosceptic, sovereignty-first message. They echoed rhetoric used by Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić (Tsertsvadze, 2023). Ties with Kyiv deteriorated even though Georgian support for Ukraine stayed above 80 per cent (National Democratic Institute [NDI], 2023). GD elites warned that "the West" aimed to wreck Georgia's economy with anti-Russia sanctions and to "drag Georgia into war." Such claims grew louder during the 2024 campaign. GD presented itself as the lone bulwark against a shadowy "deep state," said to control Western capitals, NGOs, and critical media (Civil.ge, 2024a). GD's July 2024 strategic partnership deal with China offered another signal of re-orientation. Leaders in Tbilisi promoted the pact as a way to open new logistical and digital corridors (Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MFA], 2024).

At the opposite pole, UNM—the core of the Unity – National Movement bloc—has led the opposition since 2013. It keeps a loyal base despite former president Mikheil Saakashvili's 2021 jailing on abuse-of-office charges; the party calls it politically driven (Amnesty International, 2023). UNM still champions rapid NATO and EU entry and accuses Ivanishvili of steering Georgia toward Moscow while courting Beijing (OC Media, 2024).

Gakharia for Georgia (FG) was the only party to run alone. Founded in 2021 by Giorgi Gakharia—GD's interior minister (2017-2019) and prime minister (2019-2021)—it markets itself as a pragmatic “third choice” amid deep polarisation (Civil.ge, 2021). Gakharia is still associated with the 20 June 2019 crackdown, when police used rubber bullets to injure dozens of protesters, some losing eyes (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2020). As prime minister, he oversaw Georgia’s early COVID-19 response, which health officials judged relatively effective (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2021). Though some opposition figures doubt his motives, FG has at times joined other anti-GD actors, including President Salome Zourabichvili (Civil.ge, 2024b).

Most other pro-European forces merged into two blocs in mid-2024 to clear the 5 per cent threshold and give voters an option beyond the GD-UNM standoff.

Launched on 9 July 2024, Coalition for Change (CfC) united Ahali, Girchi – More Freedom, Droa, the Republican Party, and the youth-driven Future Movement. Its leaders sought to avoid “wasted” liberal votes and to speak with one voice on swift EU and NATO entry, stricter sanctions on Russia, and judicial reform (Civil.ge, 2024c).

Strong Georgia (SG) formed on 17 July 2024, bringing together Mamuka Khazaradze’s Lelo for Georgia, Aleko Elisashvili’s Citizens, Ana Dolidze’s For the People, and the civic platform Freedom Square. Founders promised to fight for an economically strong, stable Georgia (Elisashvili, 2024).

The two coalitions agree on three core foreign-policy points. First, Georgia’s future lies within the EU and NATO. Second, Moscow’s occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is the main security threat. Third, closer work with Washington and Brussels—rather than equidistance—is the safest route to sovereignty. CfC highlights values-based alignment and supports joining Western sanctions on Russia. SG focuses on economic modernisation and “diplomatic professionalism,” yet likewise rejects neutrality as unrealistic for a frontline state.

Geopolitical and Regional Dynamics Shaping Georgia’s Foreign-Policy Debate

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reshaped Black Sea security and reached Tbilisi at once. The war revived memories of 2008 and strengthened public backing for

Euro-Atlantic integration—81 per cent of citizens still favoured EU membership in late 2023 (NDI, 2023). Yet it also highlighted the danger of provoking Moscow. NATO boosted regional air policing, while Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye deepened maritime coordination (ECFR, 2022). Georgia refused to join Western sanctions, calling its stance “pragmatic peace.” Opposition parties warned that such neutrality was risky and argued that clear alignment with Brussels and Washington offered the best deterrent (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2023).

Europe’s response added further tension. In June 2022, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova but told Georgia first to meet a twelve-point reform plan (European Commission, 2022). The decision shook Tbilisi’s self-image as the Eastern Partnership front-runner. GD blamed “double standards” in Brussels, while liberal blocs said the delay exposed GD’s democratic backsliding (European Policy Centre, 2023). At the same time, Washington shifted focus to Kyiv and China, and NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept mentioned Georgia only briefly (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO], 2022). GD used this reduced attention to defend caution; critics insisted that deeper alignment would restore U.S. interest.

Regional balances also moved. Turkey’s assertive diplomacy—brokering the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh cease-fire and mediating the Black Sea grain corridor—confirmed Ankara as a key security gatekeeper (International Crisis Group, 2023). Stronger Turkish-Azerbaijani ties gave Georgia fresh energy and transit chances yet underlined reliance on the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars axis. Beijing expanded its Belt and Road plans and promoted the Trans-Caspian “Middle Corridor,” which is now attractive as sanctions have limited Russian rail (Asian Development Bank, 2023). GD signed a strategic partnership with China in July 2024, calling it diversification, while liberal parties warned of “debt influence” and opaque finance (MFA, 2024; Pantucci, 2024).

Events in Armenia and Azerbaijan added more flux. The 2023 collapse of the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh republic tarnished Russia’s peacekeeping image and led Tbilisi to host Baku–Yerevan talks. Opposition leaders urged bolder mediation; GD claimed quiet neutrality already showed maturity (Cornell, 2024). EU embargoes on Russian hydrocarbons sped up plans for a Black Sea undersea cable linking Georgia to Romania (EBRD, 2022). GD hailed the project as “pragmatic Euro-integration,” while pro-European blocs said slow permitting revealed inertia.

Domestic shocks deepened these pressures. In March 2023, GD proposed a “foreign agents” bill targeting NGOs and media with over 20 per cent foreign funding. Mass protests forced a retreat, yet the clash cemented delegitimising frames. GD called activists “grant eaters”; opponents cited Kremlin inspiration (Transparency International Georgia, 2023). Many voters felt that the nation’s core choice—Europe or Russia—was again on the line.

Together, the Ukraine war, EU conditions, shifting U.S. priorities, Turkey’s rise, China’s corridor plans, post-Karabakh uncertainty, new energy projects, and civil-society clashes pushed foreign policy to the centre of the 2024 campaign. Each party interpreted the same shocks through its own lens, creating the stark “peace versus war” and “Europe versus Russia” binaries that drove electoral debate.

3.2 Diagnostic Frames

Framing theory sees diagnostic frames as the core of political stories: they spotlight a problem, name culprits, and set the boundaries for any proposed cure (Snow & Benford, 1988). Constructivist IR adds that such narratives do not merely describe reality; they make it by fixing blame and narrowing acceptable national choices (Hopf, 1998; Entman, 1993). During the 2024 Georgian campaign, every major party used diagnostic frames to recast a fluid world into a moral struggle only its platform could solve. Close reading of manifestos, speeches, and media comments—coded in this study—reveals four dominant diagnostic stories.

Opposition Parties

Opposition leaders and alliances in 2024 diagnosed Georgia’s plight as a direct result of Georgian Dream’s strategic backsliding and clientelism toward Moscow. They framed the election as a stark geopolitical referendum – in one analysis, “a choice between the European Union and Russia,” essentially between “European prosperity” or the “Russian swamp”. In their narrative, Bidzina Ivanishvili (GD’s founder) had betrayed Georgia’s future by steering the country off its pro-Western course. The multi-party Coalition for Change (CfC) charged that Georgian Dream “put EU accession in doubt” by politicising state institutions and pushing a Kremlin-style “foreign

agents” law, thereby “growing Moscow’s grip” on Georgia. Likewise, the Strong Georgia (SG) bloc decried GD’s rule as “treacherous obedience to Russia” that had “blocked our European road”. Senior figures in the main United National Movement (UNM) added an economic dimension, warning that GD’s turn toward Eurasia put at risk “€14 billion in EU funds and even visa-free US travel” that Georgia could otherwise attain through deeper integration (ერთიანი ნაციონალური მოძრაობა • United National Movement, 2024a). Across these opposition statements, the culprit was clear: Georgian Dream – and its shadow patron Ivanishvili – were portrayed as the agents of Georgia’s drift away from the West, imperilling the country’s democracy and sovereignty.

Opposition diagnostic framing tied domestic decline to this foreign-policy U-turn. By blaming GD for derailing EU candidacy reforms and isolating Tbilisi from allies, they fused Georgia’s internal democratic backsliding with an external threat to its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Any harm coming from abroad was thus pinned on the ruling party. For example, when Western officials began hinting at punitive steps, opposition voices insisted these were a “clear warning” triggered by GD’s misconduct, not a punishment of Georgia per se. UNM and its partners argued that U.S. visa bans on judges and oligarchs, or delays in EU accession, amounted to a moral verdict on GD’s regime, underscoring how Ivanishvili had “sabotaged Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic future” and pushed the EU door to the brink of closing. In this way, rivals cast Georgian Dream as having compromised the national interest so gravely that even Georgia’s Western friends were losing faith. Some went further to suggest that Ivanishvili might resort to anti-democratic measures to retain power. This narrative primed voters to view any international censure or election irregularity as validation of the opposition’s core diagnosis: that GD’s rule was driving Georgia toward authoritarianism, international isolation, and subservience to Moscow.

Ruling Party (Georgian Dream)

Georgian Dream (GD), in turn, defined Georgia’s problems in diametrically opposite terms. For GD, the chief threat was not a Russian hook pulling Georgia east, but an internal “war party” endangering the nation’s peace and sovereignty. Throughout the campaign, GD leaders hammered a message that the “radical opposition”—often lumped together with meddlesome Western actors—would destabilise the country. They warned that a UNM-led government would drag

Georgia into the Russia–Ukraine war or otherwise spark ruinous conflict. In a controversial ad campaign, GD juxtaposed tranquil scenes of Georgia with bombed-out Ukrainian cities to argue that it alone could keep the country safe. Party messaging cast GD as the guarantor of stability and “12 years of...peace,” versus opponents who “*were ready to sacrifice the country to war, destruction and death*”. As Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili put it, “*if [the opposition] seize even a gram of power, Georgia will return to wars and chaos*” (ქართული ოცნება / Georgian Dream, 2024a). GD officials claimed that their rivals’ calls for sanctions on Moscow or for arming Ukraine proved they were willing to make Georgia a “second front” in the broader conflict. This framing portrayed the 2024 election as a fateful choice between “war and peace, slavery and freedom”, with Georgian Dream positing itself as the force of peace and national survival.

In line with this diagnosis, GD also painted many critics – whether opposition politicians, NGOs, or even Western diplomats – as orchestrating unrest and threatening Georgia’s sovereignty. Ivanishvili and his surrogates frequently invoked the spectre of a “global war party” (a thinly veiled reference to pro-Ukraine Western interests and their local supporters) allegedly bent on dragging Georgia into confrontation. They argued that ever since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Georgia had been under “unprecedented pressure” from these forces to join in sanctions or open a front against its own interests. In GD’s telling, defending *Georgian* interests meant resisting such pressure. The ruling party even appropriated the language of patriotism and independence in this context, branding opponents as “*agents*” of foreign influence and themselves as protectors of Georgian statehood. Ivanishvili openly stated that October 26 would be “a referendum” where citizens must choose between “*Georgia’s dark past*” under the opposition and “*its bright, European future*” under GD (1TV.ge, 2024a). Notably, he paired “dark past” with “*moral decay*” and “bright...future” with “*Christian values*,” blurring foreign policy with cultural identity. Indeed, Georgian Dream intertwined its peace narrative with an emphasis on traditional national values. On the campaign trail, the party vowed to constitutionally ban “LGBT propaganda” and strengthen the Orthodox Church’s status, implying that the “moral decay” of the opposition was linked to unwelcome Western liberal influence. By pledging to uphold “Christian values” against the opposition’s supposed nihilism, GD’s diagnostic frame extended beyond geopolitics: it was defending Georgia’s identity and sovereignty from a two-pronged assault by war-mongering “globalist” liberals at home and abroad. In sum, the ruling party depicted the country’s core

problem as one of national survival, with GD as the sole bulwark against war, chaos, and cultural disintegration, and any vote against it a vote for disaster.

Third-Force and Alternative Actors

Political actors outside the two main camps – notably Giorgi Gakharia’s For Georgia (FG) party – offered yet another diagnosis of what was wrong in 2024. Positioning themselves as a moderate “third force,” they argued that both Georgian Dream and the traditional opposition were contributing to Georgia’s crisis. FG and similar centrist voices portrayed the GD–UNM duopoly as a mutually reinforcing stalemate that kept the country polarised and stagnant. As one opposition figure in the *Strong Georgia* bloc put it, Georgia needed “a positive alternative platform, where everyone who wants neither the Russian regime nor the one-party past can choose comfortably” (ძლიერი საქართველო • Dzlieri Sakartvelo, 2024). This sentiment resonated with Gakharia’s message. Gakharia – a former GD prime minister turned opponent – contended that Georgian Dream’s misrule and the UNM’s confrontational style were two sides of the same coin, each undermining the nation in different ways. He sought to reframe the national struggle not as East vs. West (as GD and UNM did), but as one of effective governance vs. dysfunction.

From Gakharia’s perspective, the ruling party had created a dual crisis that only a technocratic alternative could fix. Internationally, Georgia was becoming isolated and vulnerable; domestically, its institutions were verging on collapse. FG’s diagnosis emphasised how Ivanishvili’s clannish governance jeopardised both foreign policy and democracy. Gakharia warned, for instance, that under GD, “Georgia [has] been left internationally isolated, face-to-face with Russia” (Formula News, 2024a). This stark assessment cast Georgia’s predicament not simply as a tug-of-war between East and West, but as the *result* of GD’s alienating the country’s Western partners, leaving Georgia alone with an aggressive neighbour. At the same time, For Georgia figures argued that Georgian Dream was hollowing out state institutions and would resort to fraud to stay in power. After the foreign agent law debacle, FG surrogates asserted, GD had “broken credibility” with the West to such an extent that its “only path to victory [was] falsification” of the election. In this view, Georgia’s key problem was a government that was more intent on clinging to power than on protecting national interests. Gakharia’s team thus presented themselves as pragmatic fixers offering competence in place of GD’s corruption and the UNM’s theatrics. They backed this

diagnostic framing with detailed proposals (e.g. judicial reforms, anti-corruption measures, renewed Western outreach) to show how a *new* government could get Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic trajectory back on track. While less openly accusatory in tone, the third-force narrative still assigned blame, primarily to Georgian Dream’s leadership, for endangering Georgia’s sovereignty and future. Unlike the ideologically charged messaging of GD or UNM, however, Gakharia and other alternative actors couched their diagnosis in managerial terms. The country didn’t need patriots vs. traitors or East vs. West, they implied, so much as it needed competent leadership to end the isolation, restore democratic credibility, and reunify the nation’s purpose. This centrist framing appealed to voters exhausted by polarisation: it identified Georgia’s core woes as bad governance and lost trust, and promised a *professional, Western-oriented rescue* from the political quagmire.

3.3 Delegitimation Frames

Delegitimation frames go beyond policy criticism; they cast opponents as fundamentally unworthy to represent the nation. In Georgia’s 2024 parliamentary race, political parties on all sides deployed such frames to portray their rivals as *un-Georgian* or dangerous, effectively questioning their basic right to speak for the country. This section examines the major delegitimation strategies observed – accusing opponents of treasonous foreign allegiances, of corruption and criminality, and of moral collapse – and illustrates how these narratives shaped campaign rhetoric. It also highlights key examples of how targeted parties responded. A central flashpoint was the controversial “foreign agents” bill, quickly dubbed the “Russian law” for mirroring a 2012 Kremlin statute. Whether a party defended or denounced this draft law largely determined who was labelled a patriot and who was cast as a traitor in the 2024 campaign discourse. Against this backdrop, Georgian Dream and the opposition blocs each staked an exclusive claim to patriotic legitimacy by branding their opponents as illegitimate actors threatening Georgia’s future.

Accusations of Treason and Foreign Subservience

One dominant delegitimation strategy was to paint opponents as traitors in league with foreign powers. Both the ruling party and the opposition campaigned on claims that their rivals were beholden to outside interests – whether Moscow or the West – and thus betraying Georgia.

Georgian Dream (GD) centred its narrative on depicting the opposition as dangerous *warmongers* ready to “drag Georgia into conflict” for the sake of foreign agendas. A GD television ad, for example, juxtaposed tranquil Georgian landscapes with bombed Ukrainian streets, urging voters to “choose peace.” Reuters reported that this ad’s message was that only GD could “keep Georgia safe from Russia’s wrath,” a claim that enraged officials in Ukraine as well as GD’s domestic opponents (Light, 2024). GD leaders – including the party chairman – explicitly framed the October vote as a choice between a “*party of war*” and a “*party of peace*” (ქართული ოცნება / Georgian Dream, 2024b). In a late-campaign address, they cast the election as “a sort of referendum: between war and peace, the party of war and the party of peace”. Anyone opposing GD’s purportedly peace-oriented stance (for instance, by criticising the foreign agent law or advocating Western sanctions on Russia) was branded part of this “party of war.” By tying their rivals to the specter of a Ukraine-style conflict, GD implied that the opposition was willing to sacrifice Georgia’s safety to please external patrons. In GD’s rhetoric, such opponents were not just wrong on policy – they were treasonous, undermining the nation’s very survival for foreign interests.

Opposition parties countered with an inverse treason narrative, labelling GD as the side serving a foreign master, namely, Russia. The “Russian law” controversy became the master symbol of this frame. Critics noted the foreign agents bill’s resemblance to Putin’s repressive NGO law, and opposition leaders used that to portray GD as a Kremlin proxy. For example, the Coalition for Change (CfC) bloc’s manifesto blasted GD as a “*political police*” and vowed to “*consign the Russian law and [political] persecution to the past*” (Coalition for Change, 2024). Strong Georgia (SG) leaders likewise seized on the bill as proof of “*treacherous obedience to Russia*,” arguing that by importing Moscow’s tactics, GD had disqualified itself from Europe’s respect. The largest opposition party, Unity–UNM, added that by backing a “Kremlin-style law,” GD was even risking “*€14 billion in EU assistance*” and visa-free travel to the West – in other words, selling out Georgia’s European future for the Kremlin’s favour. Through this lens, the ruling party was depicted as unpatriotic and foreign-controlled. If “you pass a Russian law, you serve Russian interests,” as one opposition slogan put it. This delegitimizing narrative contained all the classic elements of a frame:

- **Problem:** A “Russian law” threatening Georgia’s democracy and EU integration.
- **Blame:** Georgian Dream and its founder Bidzina Ivanishvili as the agents of Moscow’s agenda.
- **Moral Judgment:** Such behaviour is a betrayal of Georgia’s European destiny and national values.
- **Call for Exclusion:** GD’s removal from power and even international sanctions against its leaders as necessary consequences.

Indeed, when the U.S. State Department in April 2024 imposed visa bans on individuals “*undermining Georgia’s democracy,*” opposition leaders hailed it as external validation of GD’s illegitimacy. The sanctions converted a moral accusation into tangible costs for the ruling elite, reinforcing the opposition’s “pro-West versus traitors” frame.

Notably, a small centrist party – Gakharia for Georgia (FG) – attempted to turn the treason framing against both poles. Its leader, ex-PM Giorgi Gakharia, argued that once Ivanishvili “took the aggressor’s side” in the Ukraine war, GD had forfeited any claim to a “peace policy”. In FG’s telling, GD’s purported neutrality was a sham: by cosying up to Moscow, the government had *isolated Georgia* and jeopardised its security. At the same time, FG accused the main opposition (UNM) of historical irresponsibility, reminding voters that UNM’s actions in 2008 helped spark the war with Russia. Gakharia’s team frequently evoked the 2008 Russo-Georgian War to tarnish UNM’s patriotic credentials, echoing GD’s line that the “war-igniters” of 2008 – the prior UNM government – had betrayed the nation. One FG spokesman bluntly claimed the foreign agent saga left GD with no chance of winning without fraud, reframing the issue as one of lost legitimacy and likely election-rigging rather than ideology. By condemning GD’s pro-Russian shift and UNM’s past adventurism in one breath, FG sought to delegitimise both extremes and present itself as the sole *truly* patriotic alternative untainted by treason or folly.

These mutual accusations of disloyalty escalated as the campaign progressed, creating a mirror-image dynamic. Each side's claim to patriotism depended on denying it to the other in a cycle of competitive exclusion. International reactions were pulled into this fray. For instance, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry publicly rebuked GD's "peace" ads for "*weaponising Ukrainian suffering*" – essentially accusing the Georgian government of echoing Russian propaganda (Civil.ge, 2024d). Opposition parties eagerly amplified Kyiv's reproach, citing it as proof of GD's moral bankruptcy and pro-Russian leanings. GD's response was to double down: officials dismissed the criticism and claimed that Ukraine had "joined UNM propaganda" against the Georgian government. Similarly, when Western partners criticised or sanctioned GD figures, the ruling party reframed it as unjust foreign pressure. GD leaders argued that such Western "meddling" was aimed at dragging Georgia into war – evidence, in their view, of a "*global war party*" conspiring against Georgia's sovereignty. In short, accusations of treason and foreign puppetry flew in both directions. GD vilified the opposition as Western-backed agents of chaos, while opposition forces portrayed GD as a Kremlin-captured regime. Each camp answered the other's attacks with a counter-frame: "We are the patriots – it's *you* who are selling out the country." This zero-sum battle of loyalty frames defined the campaign's tone and left little middle ground.

Accusations of Corruption and Criminality

A second delegitimation pattern was to depict opponents as deeply corrupt or criminal, and thus unfit to govern. Georgian political discourse has long been harsh, and in 2024, both sides revived familiar charges of graft, state capture, and legal abuse. The opposition parties consistently described Georgian Dream's government as an oligarchic regime serving a single powerful tycoon (Ivanishvili) at the expense of citizens. Campaign messaging from the Coalition for Change and Strong Georgia blocs, for example, argued that GD had become a "*Russian-style criminal syndicate*" financed by illicit schemes. Strong Georgia alleged that even international observers had confirmed Ivanishvili was subverting Georgia's democracy with "call-centre money" – a reference to an organised scam scandal – and urged voters to support a "*clean force*" on 26 October to end the "criminal regime" and restart Georgia's EU integration (TV Pirveli, 2024). In this framing, GD's leadership was not only pro-Russian but fundamentally lawless and self-serving. Likewise, the Unity–UNM coalition highlighted high-level corruption and state capture under GD. UNM's program promised to create an EU-supervised anti-corruption agency,

implicitly arguing that only external oversight could ensure accountability in Georgia. This unusual pledge – “Brussels will ensure reforms endure” – signalled the opposition’s message that domestic institutions had been gutted by GD’s corruption, and that *citizens need not trust* the ruling elite to police itself. By inviting European monitors, UNM aimed to both prove its own commitment to clean governance and underscore GD’s moral bankruptcy after over a decade in power.

Georgian Dream, for its part, retaliated by casting the opposition (especially UNM) as the truly criminal side, given the excesses of their past rule. GD officials frequently reminded the public of UNM’s record of abuses in the 2004–2012 period – from human rights violations to alleged graft – to argue that the opposition had “no moral right” to return to power. They referred to UNM as a “discredited” force stained by a “dark past” of violence and corruption. In one fiery speech, GD’s honorary chairman even declared that 26 October will be a referendum between Georgia’s dark past and its bright future, equating the opposition with darkness and wrongdoing. GD also pointed to legal actions against former UNM officials as justification. Notably, ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili remained imprisoned throughout the campaign on abuse-of-office convictions – something GD touted as accountability for past crimes, while UNM vehemently called it political persecution (Amnesty International, 2023). The ruling party used Saakashvili’s jailing to remind voters of UNM’s “criminal regime” years, arguing that those who “imprisoned and tortured people” before 2012 cannot be trusted again. In GD’s narrative, it was the opposition leaders who were *the real criminals* – a point driven home by language like “war criminals” or “terrorists” that GD surrogates occasionally used when referring to UNM hardliners. For example, GD’s founder Ivanishvili asserted that the “*war-igniters will be tried*” and branded UNM as a “*traitorous*” group that had “*set our Ossetian brothers and sisters on fire in 2008*”(On.ge, 2024). This statement not only accused UNM of war crimes but also of treachery – conflating moral and legal delegitimation – and signalled GD’s view that the opposition belongs in courtrooms, not in parliament.

Interestingly, the Gakharia for Georgia party also employed corruption framing against its rivals, again targeting both sides. Gakharia presented his breakaway party as a technocratic, *clean-hands* alternative amid two poles of decay. He often argued that GD’s mismanagement and cronyism had destroyed public trust to such an extent that the regime’s “only path to victory is falsification” (Reuters, 2024). By warning that GD could only win by rigging the election, FG implied the ruling

party was morally bankrupt and preparing to steal the vote – a preemptive delegitimisation of any GD win. Simultaneously, FG described both GD and UNM as “corrupt extremes” that had led Georgia astray. Gakharia’s campaign rhetoric cast his former GD colleagues as hopelessly corrupt *and* painted UNM as irredeemably tainted by past corruption and brutality. This twin attack bolstered FG’s self-portrayal as the sole credible force to “restore trust” domestically and abroad that had no chance of winning without fraud, thereby framing electoral integrity (or lack thereof) as the dividing line between legitimate and illegitimate contenders. FG promised a “*technocratic repair*” of institutions to root out corruption and fix what it called *institutional rot* under both the current and previous governments.

Faced with these corruption allegations, each side tried to rebut or redirect the attacks. GD leaders flatly denied plans to falsify the election and accused the opposition of spreading cynicism to discredit an outcome they expected to lose. They also sought to drown out the opposition’s corruption narrative by hammering on security themes (as described above) and by highlighting their own social programs as evidence of good governance (e.g. universal healthcare and pension increases under GD). Meanwhile, opposition figures dismissed GD’s talk of the “dark past” as an attempt to shift focus from current failures. They noted that after over a decade in power, GD itself was implicated in multiple scandals (from offshore wealth to the call-centre fraud case), which GD allegedly ignored or downplayed. When GD spokespeople characterised critics as foreign-funded “grant-eaters” or troublemakers rather than addressing specific corruption claims, opposition leaders argued this proved the government’s lack of transparency. Notably, the U.S. visa bans issued in 2024 explicitly cited corruption and democratic backsliding; the opposition leveraged these as proof that even Georgia’s partners saw GD officials as lawbreakers. GD’s response was to frame such sanctions as hostile and unjust, claiming that Western actors were out to “wreck Georgia’s economy” and force a change in government. By redefining sanctions as an attack on the country (rather than a consequence of their misconduct), GD attempted to neutralise the opposition’s corruption frame and rally nationalist sympathy.

In summary, accusations of corruption and criminality were a key tool for delegitimising rivals. The opposition painted the ruling party as an oligarchic kleptocracy mortgaging Georgia’s future for personal gain, while GD painted the opposition as a lawless cabal with a record of violence and graft. Caught in the middle, the Gakharia camp argued that *both* establishment sides were

corrupt and that only a new force could clean up Georgian politics. Each side answered corruption charges with counter-allegations or by questioning the credibility of the accuser. The result was a campaign atmosphere in which voters were constantly warned that a victory by the other side would mean a return of *gangsters, thieves or oppressors* – a classic delegitimation that sought to make the choice not just political, but moral-legal.

Accusations of Moral Collapse and Values Betrayal

A further layer of delegitimation in 2024 centred on *moral and cultural framing*. Georgian Dream and its allies, in particular, portrayed their opponents as agents of moral decay who would undermine Georgian identity and traditional values. This strategy tapped into conservative sentiments in Georgian society, painting the election as a civilisational showdown between cherished national values and corrosive “foreign” liberalism. GD’s leaders frequently juxtaposed their platform of *traditionalism* and stability with what they called the opposition’s “pseudo-liberal” agenda. For example, party chairman Irakli Kobakhidze warned that on 26 October Georgians would be choosing “*between ... liberal fascism and traditional values*” (1TV.ge, 2024b). This striking phrase – “liberal fascism” – encapsulated GD’s delegitimation of the progressive, pro-Western opposition as not only alien to Georgian culture but aggressively so. Kobakhidze and others argued that the UNM-led bloc and its partners were intent on imposing radical liberal policies (particularly on social issues) that would destroy the nation’s moral fabric. In the same breath that he spoke of a “*party of war*”, Kobakhidze also decried the threat of “*liberal fascism*” – conflating national security and cultural security in a single narrative of existential threat.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, GD’s founder and informal figurehead, amplified this moral delegitimation theme in his public statements. In a September rally, Ivanishvili described the election choice as being “*between pseudo-liberal ‘values’ and values based on nation, family, faith, and independence*” (Civil.ge, 2024e). He asserted that the opposition and its Western supporters were attempting to force alien values onto Georgia, to the detriment of Georgian traditions and the Orthodox faith. “*The violent attempts to impose pseudo-liberal values on our people from foreign countries will end once and for all,*” Ivanishvili declared, vowing that a GD victory would protect the country’s cultural sovereignty. This was part of a broader promise by GD to enshrine Georgian

Orthodox Christianity and family values in law and even in the constitution. GD campaign messages touted plans to adopt a “*Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors*” that would explicitly ban what they termed “*LGBT propaganda*,” same-sex partnerships, adoption by same-sex couples, and gender reassignment surgeries. By championing such measures, GD presented itself as the guardian of national morality. Conversely, the opposition was portrayed as beholden to “ultra-liberal” NGOs and external progressives who allegedly sought to erode Georgia’s faith and family structure. In Ivanishvili’s words, “*Orthodox Christianity will be constitutionally affirmed as a pillar of Georgia’s state identity*” under GD’s watch, implying that the alternative would be a loss of Georgia’s identity. GD officials even equated the opposition’s values with evil. “*On 26 October, Georgia will again triumph over evil*,” Ivanishvili proclaimed in a call-to-arms for voters, urging them to help secure the country’s “bright future” against this moral peril. Such rhetoric delegitimised opponents not just as wrong or unpatriotic, but as outright immoral forces threatening society’s core beliefs.

The opposition parties generally did not foreground “values” issues in their campaign – their focus remained on democracy, economic relief, and Euro-Atlantic integration. As a result, much of the moral delegitimation energy came from the GD/“People’s Power” side (a group of GD-aligned ultra-conservatives) and was aimed at scaring traditionalist voters away from the pro-Western opposition. Opposition leaders tried not to get entangled in cultural wedge debates, knowing these could be divisive. When attacked as promoters of *LGBT agendas* or anti-Church sentiments, most opposition figures either ignored the bait or responded by reaffirming their respect for Georgian traditions. They pointed out that seeking EU membership did not mean abandoning one’s faith or family – a counter-argument that European integration and Georgian identity were compatible. For instance, the Strong Georgia coalition invoked the legacy of Ilia Chavchavadze (a 19th-century Georgian national hero and writer) as inspiration for their platform, implicitly countering GD’s narrative by rooting pro-European aspirations in Georgian patriotic tradition. Their slogan, “Follow Ilia’s road – build a strong Georgia”, was meant to show that *European-style modernisation* could go hand in hand with *Georgian values*. In campaign speeches, opposition candidates accused GD of using fear-mongering tactics to distract from governance failures. As one opponent remarked in a debate, “When they have no real answers, they start talking about gay marriage or call us *liberal fascists*. It’s pure propaganda.” In general, the pro-Western parties stressed that corruption and Russian influence, not minority rights or Western culture, were the

real threats to Georgia's identity. They argued that GD's rule, with its alleged lies and lawlessness, had done more to undermine Georgian values like justice, dignity, and community than any imported liberal ideas. Thus, rather than directly contesting church doctrine or family issues, the opposition tried to redefine *morality* in terms of good governance. For example, UNM and its allies asserted a moral duty to align with Europe, claiming that honesty, the rule of law, and defending the vulnerable (all European ideals) are also traditional Georgian virtues. This was an implicit rebuttal to GD's portrayal of them as morally alien.

Despite these efforts, GD's morally charged delegitimation had a significant impact on the campaign atmosphere. By demonising opponents as not only unpatriotic but also ungodly or *anti-Georgian* in a cultural sense, GD mobilised a segment of voters for whom issues like protecting the Church or stopping "deviant" values were paramount. The language of "pseudo-liberal values," "liberal fascism," and "evil" cast the election as an apocalyptic battle for Georgia's soul. This left opposition parties in a defensive position, as outright refuting such claims risked alienating conservative voters, while ignoring them allowed GD's narrative to fester. The net effect was a further delegitimation of the opposition: not only could they be branded agents of a foreign power, they were also painted as agents of moral decay. In turn, GD's critics would later argue that the ruling party was cynically exploiting societal prejudices and sowing division, which they warned could isolate Georgia internationally and derail its European dream – an ironic outcome for a campaign ostensibly about saving Georgia's identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2024 campaign was characterised by an unusually intense use of delegitimation frames. By accusing each other of treason, corruption, and moral depravity, Georgia's major parties turned the election into a referendum on who embodied the "real" Georgia and who had forfeited the right to lead it. These frames created stark "us vs. them" narratives: one could either be a patriot or a traitor, a reformer or a criminal, a guardian of tradition or an enemy of the faith. Each camp also responded in kind to the other's attacks, doubling down on its own narrative. The cumulative effect was a highly polarised discourse that not only defined what each party stood for, but also dramatically limited the space for compromise. By branding rivals as illegitimate, parties were effectively pledging that the country's very fate and identity were at stake in the vote. Such

rhetoric, while mobilising bases, also carried post-election implications: a victor who wins on a delegitimising platform may find it hard to reconcile or negotiate with the vanquished. In the Georgian context, these delegitimation battles of 2024 underscored the fragile state of democratic dialogue, where political opponents are not just debated but denounced as enemies of the nation. The next chapter will consider how this climate affected governance after the election and what it foretells for Georgia's foreign policy trajectory in the coming years.

3.4 Motivational Frames

Motivational frames are the calls to action that give audiences a “clear reason to act now” (Snow & Benford, 1988). In Georgia's 2024 parliamentary campaign, all major parties crafted such frames to spur voter turnout in an atmosphere of geopolitical crisis and national decision point. These appeals fused high-stakes geopolitics with everyday economic concerns, effectively turning foreign policy preferences into “urgent voting imperatives”. Each political camp employed a distinct motivational logic—some pairing fear with promises of peace, others mixing hope with visions of prosperity or change with appeals to competence—but all followed a similar formula: they defined a reachable goal, specified who could achieve it, and attached moral or material rewards to voting for them. The following analysis is organised by theme to show how both the ruling party, *Georgian Dream* (GD), and the opposition coalitions (especially *Strong Georgia* and others) framed the stakes of the 2024 election to motivate citizens to vote.

Framing the Election as a Moment of Historic Urgency

Both the government and opposition rhetorically cast the 2024 election as a historic crossroads for Georgia's future. Georgian Dream emphasised the unprecedented peril of the moment due to the war in Ukraine and regional instability. Its campaign messaging implied that peace or war hung in the balance on election day. A GD television spot famously concluded with “No to war—choose peace,” warning that only a vote for GD could protect Georgian families from bomb-scarred Ukrainian streets. By invoking the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, GD framed the election as an urgent choice to avoid a similar fate for Georgia. The party's program made Euro-Atlantic integration a long-term aim but stressed that the *immediate* priority was “keep peace, protect the economy”, reinforcing the sense of a critical moment where maintaining stability was paramount.

This language portrayed October 26, 2024, as a *now-or-never* decision point to safeguard the nation's peace and stability.

Opposition leaders likewise presented the vote as a decisive moment in history—a chance to change course radically after years of stagnation. The main opposition bloc, *Coalition for Change (CfC)*, opened its manifesto with an urgent call: “Change begins on 26 October—The future is yours” (Coalition for Change, 2024). By tying a better future to the election date, CfC explicitly framed voting day as the start of a new era. The manifesto then made a dramatic promise that by 2030, “every citizen will hold an EU passport,” underscoring the election's historic significance as the gateway to full European integration. This future-oriented slogan suggested that failing to act in 2024 could delay or derail Georgia's European dream for years. The *Strong Georgia (SG)* coalition took a more symbolic historical angle. Its program, pointedly titled “Ilia's Road,” invoked the 19th-century national hero Ilia Chavchavadze as a guiding spirit. The very slogan “Follow Ilia's road—build a Marshall Plan” linked the upcoming vote to a proud historical mission of national revival and Western-style reconstruction. By wrapping its appeal in the mantle of a revered patriot and comparing its economic plan to the historic Marshall Plan, SG cast the 2024 election as *nothing less than a turning point in Georgia's national story*. In sum, across the spectrum, parties conveyed a sense that this election was a historic juncture, whether to avert war or to achieve a long-awaited European future, and that urgency infused every call to action.

Calls to Act to "Save the Country"

Running through these motivational frames was a dramatic call to “save the country” from existential threats, albeit with duelling narratives about what the gravest threat was. The ruling party's appeal rested on saving Georgia from the horrors of war and chaos. Georgian Dream explicitly argued that without its continued leadership, the country's security and economy would be in jeopardy. The stark message to vote for GD on 26 October, or risk war and recession encapsulated this life-or-death framing. By suggesting that a victory for the opposition might drag Georgia into conflict or economic collapse, GD portrayed itself as the nation's saviour. Only GD, they argued, had “twelve years of peace” as proof of competence in keeping Georgia safe. In this way, GD's campaign painted the opposition as a dangerous gamble and positioned a vote for GD as an act of rescue, saving Georgian families from violence and hardship.

The opposition, in contrast, implored voters to save the country from what they saw as an authoritarian slide and loss of sovereignty under Georgian Dream. Their motivational framing identified the current government itself as the thing Georgia needed saving from. For example, Coalition for Change’s narrative combined *indignation* at GD’s governance with *hope* for national redemption. They urged citizens to “punish [the] illegitimate rulers” of GD – effectively casting the act of voting them out as a patriotic duty to rescue Georgian democracy. The opposition argued that GD had betrayed Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations, citing GD’s passage of the “Russian law” on foreign agents as proof of obedience to Russia. Removing GD was thus presented not just as a political choice but as a necessary salvation of Georgia’s Western future. *Strong Georgia* pushed this salvation theme by warning of dire consequences if the country stayed on GD’s path. SG’s framing invoked Snow and Benford’s (1992) “rhetoric of severity,” cautioning that failure to change course in 2024 would mean a deeper Russian influence, mass emigration, and economic collapse. In other words, a vote for the opposition was framed as the only way to stop Georgia’s deterioration and preserve its independence. Even smaller third forces adopted this rescue motif: for instance, *Gakharia for Georgia* explicitly offered a “*pragmatic rescue*” narrative, asking voters to help “*break the binary*” of GD vs. UNM and “*restore trust*” in Georgia’s direction. Across these examples, the core motivational message was that voters must act to save the nation, whether saving it from war (in GD’s telling) or from the current government’s misrule and its consequences (in the opposition’s telling).

Promises of Peace, Stability, and Development

Balancing their warnings of disaster, all parties promised tangible rewards – most often peace, stability, or economic development – if voters heeded their call. The *Georgian Dream* campaign centred on the promise of continued peace and stability above all. Its slogan, “Choose peace – vote stability”, captured GD’s pitch that a GD government is the guarantor of peace. This positive promise was always coupled with the warning of war to make the contrast clear (avert catastrophe vs. ensure stability). GD pointed to the country’s steady development during its tenure and offered new economic initiatives as proof that stability would bring prosperity. For example, the party highlighted plans for “pragmatic cooperation” with China and new revenues from the Middle Corridor (a Eurasian transport corridor) as material benefits of its cautious foreign policy (MFA, 2024). These concrete development projects were portrayed as peace dividends that only a steady

hand like GD could deliver. In short, GD’s motivational frame promised voters *the continuity of peace and growth*: by voting for GD, they could avoid war and enjoy further economic stability.

The opposition coalitions, while equally touting peace and prosperity, framed those rewards as achievable only through political change and Westward re-alignment. They offered hopeful visions of rapid development and European integration to inspire voters. Coalition for Change explicitly promised prosperity on par with EU standards: its manifesto pledged “EU-level salaries, education deposits for every child, and local control over forests and land,” making abstract EU integration feel tangible in daily life (Coalition for Change, 2024). The promise that “*every citizen will hold an EU passport*” underscored both freedom and security – a future where Georgians travel visa-free and benefit from EU support. Likewise, *Strong Georgia* combined patriotic pride with economic modernisation in its Marshall Plan proposal. SG proposed multi-billion lari investments to create 200,000 jobs and raise pensions to ₾1,000. This bold “*Marshall Plan*” invoked post-war reconstruction imagery, implying that Georgia under SG would experience a dramatic rebuilding and growth phase. The appeal was twofold: honour the national canon (by following Ilia’s pro-Western vision) *and* secure EU membership with its attendant stability and funding. Other opposition voices added to these promises of peace and development: the *Unity-National Movement (UNM)* bloc, for instance, campaigned on unlocking massive Western support, urging voters to “vote to unlock €14 billion in EU support and U.S. visa freedom” (ერთიანი ნაციონალური მოძრაობა • United National Movement, 2024b). This message emphasised that a pro-opposition vote would immediately yield concrete benefits like foreign aid and new travel opportunities. All these pledges – whether GD’s peace and infrastructure or the opposition’s European prosperity packages – were designed to show voters a hopeful payoff for their participation. The competing camps thus offered different paths, but both promised that development and security were within reach, contingent on the electorate making the *right* choice at the polls.

Warnings Against Apathy and Disengagement

Underpinning these frames was a clear effort to combat voter apathy by stressing that inaction would carry heavy costs. Each side messaged that staying home or disengaged was not a neutral choice but essentially a decision to let disaster happen or opportunities slip away. Georgian

Dream's rhetoric was especially direct: it presented the act of voting for GD as the only way to avoid calamity. The slogan "vote for GD on 26 October, or risk war and recession" is a quintessential fear appeal, implying that not voting (or voting otherwise) invites national peril. This dire either-or warning was meant to jolt complacent voters by making the stakes personal – *your family's safety and livelihood are at risk*. Notably, GD coupled its fear appeals with assurances of efficacy so that citizens wouldn't feel helpless. The party pointed to its proven record (peace over 12 years) to say, in effect, *your vote will make a difference* because GD can indeed deliver the promised safety. This aligns with research that fear-based appeals only mobilise people if paired with a sense that effective action is possible (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Thus, GD's messaging tried to overcome potential fatalism: yes, war is a threat, but you, the voter, have the power to prevent it by choosing correctly.

The opposition parties likewise worked to energise the electorate and dispel any feelings that voting might not matter. Coalition for Change's two-step call to action to vote for CfC and maintain popular pressure so accession talks open immediately after the change explicitly instructed citizens that their engagement shouldn't end at the ballot box. This was a warning against passivity: Georgia's European future required both electoral and civic action. The very phrasing "Change begins on 26 October" (emphasis on *begins*) conveyed that voting is just the start of the process. By invoking past successes like the 2013 EU Association Agreement and visa-free travel, CfC reassured voters that their participation *can* yield real results (as it has before). *Strong Georgia* took a notably inclusive approach to fight apathy, appealing especially to previously disengaged citizens. SG's platform promised *reciprocity* between voters and leaders: if citizens vote for SG, then SG delivers immediate relief and an 'EU future.' In this framing, voters become "co-authors of the Marshall Plan, not passive beneficiaries," invited to actively take part in rebuilding the nation. By using this participatory tone, SG sought to inspire first-time and undecided voters, making them feel that their vote would directly *shape* the country's trajectory. Moreover, opposition parties frequently emphasised that failing to vote was effectively a vote for the status quo – a point underscored by their severe depictions of what another term of GD would mean (e.g. "*deeper Russian influence*" and "*economic collapse*" if change is missed). In combination, these messages served as antidotes to apathy: they underscored that *every vote was consequential* and that only active engagement – casting a ballot and holding leaders accountable – could guarantee Georgia the better future being promised.

Overall, the motivational framing employed by Georgian Dream and the opposition in 2024 was designed to leave no room for indifference. By framing the election in epic terms – a historic turning point, a battle for national salvation, a choice between war and peace or poverty and prosperity – both sides made a conscious effort to galvanise voter turnout. They not only offered voters something to aspire to (peace, stability, development) or to fear (war, collapse), but also stressed the efficacy and urgency of voting *now*. In doing so, the parties turned abstract foreign policy orientations into vivid personal stakes, hoping that an electorate moved by either fear or hope would translate that emotion into action at the polls. As frame theory suggests, the side that most effectively combined strong motivation with credible reassurance may have had the advantage in mobilising support (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Regardless of the outcome, the 2024 campaign vividly demonstrates how political actors use motivational framing to transform an election into a compelling call for collective action.

3.5 Identity Frames

In political campaigns, identity framing links policy debates to deeper questions of “who we are” as a nation. In the context of Georgia’s 2024 parliamentary elections, parties strategically invoked themes of national identity to persuade voters. This chapter examines how the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) and the main opposition coalitions employed identity-centric narratives – from sovereignty and cultural heritage to visions of Europeanness – to frame their foreign policy stances. The purpose is to understand how these competing narratives sought to define Georgia’s national character and future, and why identity framing is central to this study of campaign discourse.

National Sovereignty and Independence

One of the most salient identity themes in the 2024 campaign was national sovereignty. Georgian Dream consistently presented itself as the guardian of Georgia’s independence and statehood. Its leaders warned that the opposition would endanger the country’s sovereignty by dragging Georgia into war or making it subservient to foreign interests. In campaign messaging, GD urged voters to “*choose between war and peace,*” portraying the election as a fateful choice in which backing the opposition meant conflict with Russia. They explicitly cast the contest in stark identity terms – “*slavery against sovereignty*” – implying that an opposition victory would turn Georgia into a

pawn of external forces. At a major rally, GD's founder Bidzina Ivanishvili went so far as to label opposition leaders "*a union of people without a motherland*" who would "*sign any order*" from foreign patrons (1TV.ge, 2024c). By framing rivals as disloyal and themselves as the sole defenders of the nation, the ruling party made sovereignty a core of its identity appeal.

The opposition coalitions, in turn, constructed a very different sovereignty narrative. For them, Georgian Dream's policies had compromised the country's independence by aligning with Moscow and stalling on European integration. Opposition leaders described the 2024 vote as a referendum on Georgia's geopolitical identity – essentially a choice between remaining an EU-oriented democracy or slipping under Russia's sway. They argued that true sovereignty meant resisting Kremlin influence and fulfilling the people's will to join the European family of nations. At opposition rallies, speakers vowed to "*preserve Georgia's freedom and independence*" from Russian domination. One demonstrator encapsulated the sentiment by declaring, "*Georgia is a very European country and our future is in the EU, in the West*" (Reuters, 2024) In this framing, GD was portrayed as betraying the national interest – a party tacitly cooperating with the Kremlin – whereas the opposition claimed the mantle of patriotic defenders of Georgia's rightful place among European democracies.

Notably, each side directly responded to the other's identity claims on sovereignty. Georgian Dream dismissed the opposition's pro-Western stance as reckless and controlled by outsiders. GD leaders propagated a "Global War Party" conspiracy, alleging that Western elites and their Georgian proxies wanted to open a "second front" of the Ukraine war in Georgia. This narrative allowed GD to claim it was protecting Georgia's survival by resisting pressure from abroad. Opposition figures countered by highlighting GD's backsliding on EU reforms and even accused the ruling party of "*turning Georgia towards Moscow.*" They pointed to GD's confrontations with Western partners and failure to meet EU candidacy criteria as evidence that the government was undermining Georgia's sovereign European choice. Thus, both camps wrapped their foreign policy positions in the language of sovereignty – either *peaceful neutrality to save the nation* (GD's view) or *decisive Western alignment to secure true independence* (the opposition's view). Each side painted the other as endangering Georgia's statehood, making sovereignty an emotionally charged identity frame in the campaign.

Cultural and Religious Heritage

Another key battleground of identity framing revolved around Georgia's cultural and religious heritage. Georgian Dream campaigned as the defender of Georgia's centuries-old traditions, Orthodox Christian faith, and family values. Party leaders frequently invoked the slogan "homeland, language, and faith" – the classic pillars of Georgian identity – and warned that these pillars were under attack. GD advertisements and speeches contrasted what they called "*pseudo-liberal values*" with Georgian "nationalism, family, faith, and independence". In their narrative, the opposition (and its civil society allies) were accused of eroding traditional values under the guise of liberalism. For example, GD officials claimed the rival camp harboured "*militant atheism*" and conducted a "*shameless attack*" on the Georgian Orthodox Church. Speaker of Parliament Shalva Papuashvili alleged that opponents were even waging a campaign against religious icons and the date of Christmas. Such statements portrayed the ruling party as the pious guardian of the nation's spiritual core, and the opposition as a threat to the Church and cultural continuity. This framing resonated with conservative segments of society; indeed, many GD supporters said they don't want to lose traditional values of family and church even as they pursue EU membership.

Georgian Dream's emphasis on religious identity culminated in a controversial proposal to elevate Orthodox Christianity to the status of state religion during the campaign. Strengthening the Church's official role became an explicit GD platform point. This move was widely seen as an attempt to rally nationalist sentiment. However, it drew criticism from multiple directions. The Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate itself declined the idea, fearing it would politicise the Church. Opposition parties seized on this episode to rebut GD's narrative. They accused Georgian Dream of cynically exploiting religion for electoral gain. Mamuka Khazaradze, leader of the Lelo party in the Strong Georgia coalition, called the state-religion proposal an "*election trick*" and urged that any constitutional change be discussed only by broad consensus, not as a campaign stunt. Other opposition figures publicly aligned with the Church's position to neutralise GD's attacks. For instance, Badri Japaridze of Lelo noted that "*Georgian Dream's trick failed*" after the Patriarchate voiced disapproval, and he vowed to "*strongly support the position of the Georgian Orthodox Church*" against politicisation (Formula News, 2024b). By doing so, the opposition

signalled that pro-European forces were not hostile to Georgian traditions or faith. They reinforced that one can be both a devout Georgian and pro-Western – a direct rebuttal to GD’s framing.

Beyond the Church issue, cultural identity was also invoked through debates on social values. Georgian Dream championed a proposed “LGBT propaganda” law similar to Russia’s, casting it as protection of family morality. This was part of GD’s broader messaging that Western liberal influences posed a threat to Georgian culture. The opposition, wary of falling into GD’s trap, trod carefully on these topics. They generally refrained from promoting liberal social agendas during the campaign, focusing instead on shared national values. Opposition leaders often emphasised that *joining Europe does not mean abandoning our heritage*. In speeches, they argued that Georgia’s European integration would “*happen on our own terms, with our customs, our traditions, our mentality intact*” – implicitly countering GD’s suggestion that Westernisation equals cultural loss. In sum, the cultural heritage frame saw GD casting itself as the true custodian of Georgian identity (faith, family, tradition) while painting opponents as alienated from those roots. The opposition responded by embracing national symbols (often literally waving Georgian and EU flags side by side at rallies) and by denying any intent to undermine the Church or family values. This tug-of-war over cultural identity allowed each side to appeal to voters’ sense of who is a “real” Georgian and whose vision aligns with the nation’s soul.

Visions of Europeanness and Geopolitical Belonging

The question of Georgia’s European identity – essentially, where the country belongs in the world – was the overarching theme that tied the above frames together. All major parties professed support for eventual EU membership, but they framed “Europeanness” in sharply different ways. The opposition’s narrative presented Europe as Georgia’s destiny. They argued that after centuries on the margins, Georgia must “return to the European family” and embrace Western democratic standards. Opposition coalitions campaigned on a promise to fulfil EU reform criteria and secure Georgia’s candidate status, which they said Georgian Dream had put at risk. Their messaging often juxtaposed Europe with Russia as a civilisational choice. For example, opposition ads and speeches described the election as choosing between “*a future in Europe or a future under Moscow.*” This *Europe vs. Russia* framed the opposition as champions of a modern European Georgia, while casting GD as leading the country backwards toward Eurasian authoritarianism. Even stylistically,

opposition campaigns leaned into European imagery – using EU flags, pro-Ukraine rhetoric, and references to “European values” – to reinforce the idea that to be Georgian is to be European. In the words of one young activist at a protest, “*we’re here to say out loud that Georgia is a European country*” (Reuters, 2024). This reflects how deeply the pro-European identity had been embraced by the opposition and its supporters.

Georgian Dream’s vision of Europeanness was more ambivalent and conditional. On one hand, GD leaders insisted they had not abandoned Georgia’s EU aspirations; the party even adopted the slogan “Only with peace, dignity, and prosperity to Europe” as a centrepiece of its campaign (Civil.ge, 2024f). This slogan encapsulated GD’s reframing of European integration: Georgia would reach Europe on its own terms. “*Peace*” and “*dignity*” were code for avoiding sacrifices that, in GD’s view, the opposition was willing to make (such as confronting Russia or acceding to unwelcome liberal norms). GD argued that rushing toward the West at any cost was dangerous. Instead, they advocated a “*pragmatic policy*” toward Moscow – essentially, keeping Georgia out of the Ukraine conflict – as the only way to safeguard Georgia’s statehood on the path to Europe. Georgian Dream officials stressed that they sought EU membership “*based on Georgian rules*”. In practice, this meant emphasising conservative values and sovereignty within the EU context, rather than fully embracing the liberal democratic model pushed by Brussels. For example, GD pointed approvingly to Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, who visited Tbilisi and praised the government’s stance. GD insiders highlighted that countries like Orbán’s Hungary share “core values of family, traditions, statehood, sovereignty, peace” (Reuters, 2024) – values they claimed were being sidelined by Western liberals but were central to Georgia’s identity. By aligning themselves with the more nationalist vision of Europe espoused by some East European leaders, Georgian Dream constructed an image of *Europeanness compatible with Georgian conservatism*. This allowed them to claim they were still pursuing EU integration, while implicitly rejecting the opposition’s more progressive European vision.

The clash between these competing visions was evident in how each side spoke about the West. Georgian Dream frequently accused Western institutions and even friendly governments of meddling in Georgia’s affairs. The ruling party and its allies disseminated anti-Western propaganda suggesting that the United States and the EU were covertly backing the opposition to destabilise Georgia. This fed into GD’s identity narrative that *being proudly Georgian meant*

standing up to outside pressure, even if that pressure came from the country’s traditional Western partners. Opposition parties answered by underscoring how isolated Georgia was becoming under GD. They reminded voters that under GD’s rule, the European Commission had repeatedly cited democratic backsliding and failure to reform as reasons Georgia lagged behind Ukraine and Moldova in the EU accession process. To dramatise GD’s estrangement from the West, opposition figures often noted incidents like GD officials openly attacking EU diplomats or embracing Kremlin talking points, which they framed as an affront to Georgia’s European identity. In essence, the opposition claimed GD’s government was “pro-Russian” in all but name – a label meant to undercut GD’s legitimacy in a country where a majority still favours EU membership. Georgian Dream vehemently rejected that label and doubled down on the idea that it was *protecting Georgia’s European future by keeping the peace*. “No one wants another war,” GD’s narrative ran, and only the ruling party could guarantee both peace and a long-term European path. This argument proved persuasive to many risk-averse voters, illustrating how identity frames can tap into existential fears. As one analysis noted, GD’s message of “a choice between war and peace” ultimately resonated more than the opposition’s call to choose between Russia and Europe (Sauer, 2024).

Identity frame through visuals: Georgian Dream even translated its identity narrative into striking visuals during the campaign. In late September 2024, GD unveiled massive street banners and social media videos that juxtaposed war-torn Ukrainian cities with peaceful scenes of Georgia. On one banner, the ruins of Mariupol appeared beside a glittering skyline of Batumi, captioned “No to War!” versus “Choose Peace!” (Light, 2024). Tellingly, the destroyed Ukrainian buildings were overlaid with the logos or numbers of opposition parties, while the intact Georgian images bore GD’s number 41 and slogan. This visual framing implied that supporting the opposition would lead to Georgian cities sharing the fate of bombed-out Ukraine, whereas supporting GD meant safety and prosperity. Such imagery reinforced the ruling party’s identity claim as the saviour of the nation, the force standing between Georgia and chaos. Opposition leaders condemned these tactics as fearmongering and countered with their own symbolism, emphasising unity with Europe and solidarity with Ukraine. For instance, many opposition campaign events prominently featured both the Georgian and EU flags, and some leaders wore the Ukrainian colours to stress their alignment with Western values. Each camp thus leveraged identity-laden symbols: GD focused on the trauma of war and the sanctity of homeland, while the opposition

evoked Georgia's European destiny and historical friendships. Voters were presented with two diverging imaginations of Georgia's identity – one anchored in cautious nationalism and another in aspirational Europeanism.

Conclusion

In summary, the 2024 election campaigns became an arena for defining Georgian identity through framing. Georgian Dream cast itself as the unequivocal defender of Georgia's sovereignty, faith, and traditions, using those identities to legitimise its foreign policy of cautious balance (and to delegitimise opponents as unpatriotic). The opposition coalitions, despite their diversity, coalesced around a shared counternarrative: that Georgia's true identity is European and democratic, and that the nation's dignity and future depended on repudiating GD's Russia-leaning course. These competing frames did not exist in isolation; party leaders constantly challenged each other's narratives. When GD spoke of "*patriotism versus betrayal*," the opposition shot back with charges of "West versus Russia". When GD wrapped itself in the Church and traditional values, opponents exposed this as political theatre and affirmed that those same values could thrive under a pro-European government. The result was a campaign discourse dominated by themes of identity – national independence, cultural heritage, and civilisational choice. For a young democracy like Georgia, where questions of geopolitical orientation and national identity are deeply intertwined, such framing was not just electoral rhetoric but part of an ongoing struggle over the country's direction. This chapter's thematic analysis shows how identity framing served as a powerful tool for both sides: it simplified complex foreign policy debates into familiar narratives of belonging, and in doing so, it mobilised voters' emotions about what it means to be Georgian in a turbulent world. The next chapter will build on these insights by examining how these identity frames intersected with parties' attempts to delegitimise their opponents, further illuminating the dynamics of Georgia's 2024 campaign discourse.

3.6 Competence Frames

Introduction

Focusing on the late-campaign period (May–October 2024), this section examines how the political parties/coalitions framed their policy proposals and projected credibility. The discussion is organised thematically, comparing how each group addressed key issues and demonstrated its fitness to govern.

Economic and Social Policy Proposals

Georgian Dream (GD), as the incumbent ruling party, leaned on its economic track record and promised continuity of growth and stability. GD’s campaign ads highlighted achievements under its government, such as infrastructure development and recent economic gains, and pledged “more of the same” progress in the future. These positive messages, however, were often overshadowed by GD’s negative campaigning. The ruling party rarely detailed new socio-economic initiatives beyond general prosperity; instead, it emphasised that only GD could safeguard existing welfare and avoid disruption. This framing implied that keeping GD in power was the safe route to continued “peace, dignity, and prosperity”. By invoking its past performance and a promise of steady improvement, GD portrayed itself as the *competent steward* of the economy. Its core economic message was essentially “*stick with us for sustained prosperity*”.

In contrast, the opposition parties offered more specific social and economic promises. UNM-Unity – the alliance of the United National Movement with Strategy Agmashenebeli – ran on an overtly populist socio-economic platform aimed at less affluent voters. They starkly framed the choice as “prosperity in Europe” versus “poverty in isolation,” linking economic well-being to a pro-Western course. UNM-Unity set out five key priorities: *EU membership, income growth, protection of pensioners, strong families, and an end to price monopolies*. In practice, this translated into generous pledges for ordinary people. For example, the bloc promised substantial relief for older people, including raising pensions, cancelling pension-backed loans, and providing free medicines for seniors. They also vowed to introduce child benefits and free school meals to support families and combat Georgia’s “demographic crisis”. Another notable proposal was “Mikheil Saakashvili’s billion-Lari fund” to lure Georgian emigrants back home by financing their return and reintegration. By detailing these social programs, UNM-Unity presented itself as a champion of the people’s welfare. Its leaders – including Giorgi Vashadze and Tina Bokuchava – argued that they had both the experience (as members of the reformist 2004–2012 UNM

government) and the *political will* to implement these promises. This mix of past credentials and a generous welfare agenda was intended to signal *competence with compassion*: UNM-Unity cast itself as capable managers who would ensure broad prosperity rather than enrichment of elites.

The Coalition for Change (CfC), composed of new and liberal parties (Ahali, Girchi – More Freedom, and Droa), took a different tack by emphasising economic liberty and youthful innovation. Their messaging featured optimistic imagery, such as smiling families on “Future is Yours” billboards, suggesting confidence in Georgia’s future. Instead of elaborate social programs, CfC’s platform prioritised structural economic reforms to unleash growth. In an ambitious “4-4-4” plan, the coalition vowed to enact key initiatives in four policy areas within four days of taking office. Two of these priorities were explicitly economic: cutting taxes for families and small businesses to stimulate entrepreneurship, and boosting education funding to EU levels by 2028 to invest in human capital (Tabula, 2024). By pledging swift action on tax relief and education, CfC positioned itself as a results-oriented technocratic force. The presence of figures like Zurab Japaridze (a libertarian advocate of free markets) and Elene Khoshtaria (a progressive reformer) underscored the coalition’s promise of “*new and clean leaders*” with concrete solutions. Their campaign’s energetic social media content – mixing humour with policy snippets – reinforced the image of a dynamic, *competent new generation* ready to govern. In essence, Coalition for Change framed its economic solutions around modernisation and agility, implying that its mix of youthful creativity and policy expertise would deliver better results than the old parties.

Strong Georgia (SG), an eclectic pro-Western alliance (led by Mamuka Khazaradze’s Lelo and joined by Ana Dolidze’s For People, Aleko Elisashvili’s Citizens, and others), offered a blend of populist social promises and big development projects. SG was among the first to present a detailed manifesto – called “*Ilia’s Path*” – early in the campaign (Strong Georgia, 2024). This platform set ambitious economic goals. A signature proposal was to finally construct the Anaklia Deep Sea Port on the Black Sea, a strategic infrastructure project expected to create jobs and boost trade. SG leaders vowed the port’s construction would help generate “200,000 new jobs”, tying infrastructure to employment. To raise living standards, SG promised to introduce a formal minimum wage (a first for Georgia) and increase average incomes. The coalition also pledged European-style social safety nets: for instance, it advocated using proceeds from a new heavy gambling tax to raise pensions for retirees. These socio-economic pledges were paired with SG’s

efforts to portray itself as a “*new and clean*” alternative. Early adverts literally depicted a stark contrast between grim scenes of “unkept promises” (under past governments) and a vibrant future delivered by “new and clean leaders”. Through such imagery, SG implied that it had fresh credibility to succeed where others failed. Notably, SG’s leadership included professionals from diverse fields – an ex-banker (Khazaradze), a law professor (Dolidze), a civic activist (Elisashvili), and even a former president as a supporter, showcasing a breadth of expertise. This diversity was a selling point: the campaign likened the alliance’s harmony of different ideas to “*Georgian polyphonic music*”. By highlighting both its policy plans (jobs, wages, pensions) and the broad competence of its team, Strong Georgia sought to assure voters that it could deliver tangible improvements.

Gakharia’s For Georgia (often referred to as “*Gakharia for Georgia*” to capitalise on its leader’s name recognition) approached economic and social issues with a message of realism and stability. Giorgi Gakharia, a former Prime Minister (2020–21) under GD, broke away to form this party and frequently stressed his personal record of competent governance. His campaign did not unveil highly distinctive welfare schemes (For Georgia, 2024); instead, Gakharia broadly promised to fulfil many of GD’s economic and social promises – “except it’s for real” this time. In other words, he implied that the ruling party’s talk of prosperity, jobs, and EU integration was insincere or poorly executed, whereas *he* would implement similar goals earnestly and efficiently. One televised ad featured Gakharia declaring a pledge to take Georgia “to Europe with real peace, real dignity, real prosperity”, pointedly inserting the word “real” to distinguish his commitments from GD’s slogan. In policy terms, For Georgia’s program aligned with a moderate centre-right vision: encouraging investment, improving social support incrementally, and maintaining macroeconomic stability (as per Gakharia’s technocratic image). Although less detailed publicly than some rivals, the party’s pitch was rooted in *credibility*: Gakharia asked voters to trust his proven administrative skills to manage the economy better than either GD or the more populist opposition. By reminding the public that, under his premiership, Georgia saw no high-level corruption scandals and maintained economic stability, he presented *himself* as the guarantee that promised solutions would actually be delivered. This technocratic, managerial approach set For Georgia apart as a more restrained yet *competent* option for incremental socio-economic progress.

European Integration and Foreign Policy

The question of Georgia’s geopolitical orientation – namely, how to achieve EU membership and handle the threat from Russia – loomed over the 2024 campaign. Georgian Dream and the opposition offered starkly different framings of this issue, each claiming unique competence in securing the nation’s safety and Western integration.

Georgian Dream framed the election as a choice between “War and Peace”, explicitly suggesting that its continued rule was the only way to avoid a disastrous conflict with Russia. As war raged in Ukraine, GD saturated public spaces with billboards juxtaposing images of Ukrainian wartime destruction against images of “sunny Georgia” at peace. The slogan “No to War – Yes to Peace” (often simplified to “*War vs. Peace*”) became central to GD’s narrative. In these ads, GD implied that opposition parties, whom they labelled the “agents” of a so-called global war party, would recklessly drag Georgia into war with Russia. Equally, GD warned that the pro-Western opposition’s aggressive stance toward Moscow could jeopardise Georgia’s security and even its EU aspirations by provoking instability. Instead, GD claimed it would lead Georgia to Europe “only with peace, dignity, and prosperity”. This tag line, splashed on campaign posters (with GD and EU flags side by side), encapsulated the party’s positioning as both pro-European and peace-preserving. The underlying message was that *European integration must be pursued cautiously and pragmatically*, keeping Georgia out of war. GD thus sought to appear uniquely *responsible and competent* on foreign policy – the party that could balance Western ambitions with regional peace. By evoking the 2008 Russo-Georgian War (which happened under UNM) and the ongoing Ukraine war, GD cast itself as the *guardian of national security*, claiming no other group had the experience or judgment to steer Georgia safely toward the EU.

The opposition alliances all challenged GD’s narrative, each reframing how Georgia could integrate with the West while remaining secure. UNM-Unity flatly rejected the notion that seeking NATO/EU membership meant inviting war. They accused GD of *using fear to stall Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration* and argued that true security comes from aligning firmly with the West, not accommodating Moscow. UNM-Unity’s campaign pledged to “open negotiations for EU membership immediately” upon taking office. Party leaders Tina Bokuchava and Giorgi Vashadze even quantified the stakes: they asserted that once Georgia starts accession talks, it could gain access to a €14 billion EU fund for reforms and development, money allegedly blocked by GD’s foot-dragging on reforms. Although fact-checkers noted this figure was a rough extrapolation

(Kirvalidze, 2024), the promise was symbolically powerful. By emphasising an immediate push for EU candidacy and aid, UNM-Unity portrayed itself as the *competent facilitator of Georgia's European dream*. To reassure voters on security, they leveraged the UNM's legacy of building a strong Georgian army and state institutions in the 2000s, while contending that GD's equivocations had left the country more vulnerable. Their slogan "prosperity in Europe" vs "poverty in isolation" framed EU integration not just as a foreign policy goal but as the path to national well-being. Visually, UNM-Unity's ads featured passports, aeroplanes, and suitcases, underlining promises like visa-free travel with the U.S. (in addition to existing EU visa-free travel). This imagery suggested a future where Georgia is open, mobile, and connected globally. At the same time, UNM-Unity kept a hard edge in its messaging toward the ruling party: their red banners urged voters to "Choose Unity – Get rid of Bidzina" (Ivanishvili, GD's founder). By targeting the oligarch seen as pro-Russian, the alliance reinforced its stance that removing GD was necessary to secure a truly Western future. In sum, UNM-Unity presented *bold pro-European actions* as the competent choice, countering GD's warnings by arguing that real peace and prosperity required finally breaking from Russia's shadow through Euro-Atlantic integration.

The Coalition for Change likewise championed an assertive Western-oriented agenda, but with a liberal, reformist framing. In its "4-4-4" plan, the *first priority* was the "immediate opening of EU accession negotiations", mirroring UNM's sense of urgency. The second was abolishing the so-called "Russian law" – referring to foreign agent legislation and other anti-democratic laws reminiscent of Moscow's influence – to align Georgia's democracy with European standards (Tabula, 2024). These priorities signalled that CfC saw *democratic reform and EU integration as inseparable* and non-negotiable. Coalition for Change leaders (notably former political prisoner Nika Gvaramia and ex-UNM chair Nika Melia) frequently cited their pro-Western credentials and personal sacrifices, arguing this gave them credibility to stand up to Russia's malign influence. Campaign ads from CfC were upbeat and often playful, but their content carried a serious promise: that the "future is yours" only if Georgia decisively chooses the European path. Unlike GD's dire warnings, CfC maintained a positive tone about integration – for example, producing social media reels of youthful supporters chanting aspirational slogans or even tongue-in-cheek skits about freedom. This approach framed Westernisation as exciting and within reach. At the same time, CfC did address security concerns: leaders like Zurab Japaridze insisted that aligning with the West would *ensure Georgia's sovereignty*, and they criticised GD for isolating the country

internationally. In positioning themselves, the Coalition for Change cultivated an image of modern, savvy leadership – people who could deftly navigate international partnerships. By highlighting ties with European liberal circles and a commitment to meet EU reform criteria, CfC signalled that it had the expertise and seriousness to achieve candidate status where GD had failed. Thus, in foreign affairs, Coalition for Change framed itself as the *forward-looking problem-solver*, unencumbered by past baggage and fully committed to Western integration as the key to security and progress.

Strong Georgia (SG) combined its pro-European stance with elements of nationalist rhetoric to appeal to a broad audience. Like the other oppositions, SG signed onto President Zourabichvili's "Georgian Charter" – a pledge of unity among pro-Western forces to enact EU-recommended reforms via a technocratic government. This signalled SG's commitment to meeting EU conditions swiftly. In their platform, SG proposed creating a special Ministry for EU Integration to intensify the accession process. However, SG also distinguished itself by addressing public anxieties about Russian influence more bluntly. The coalition promised to introduce a visa regime for Russian citizens, restrict direct flights from Russia, and ban the sale of Georgian agricultural land to Russians. These hard-line measures were framed as protecting Georgia's sovereignty and insulating it from Russia's economic/political penetration – a stance likely designed to project strength and competence in national security. At the same time, SG did not shy away from traditional Georgian values: notably, Mamuka Khazaradze endorsed a controversial idea (also floated by GD) to enshrine the Georgian Orthodox Church as the state religion, arguing that "Georgia does not and will not exist without the Church" (Khazaradze, 2024). By taking this position, SG tried to reassure more conservative voters that pursuing Europe's "entering the free world" does not mean abandoning national identity. In effect, Strong Georgia's foreign policy framing was two-pronged – staunchly pro-EU and anti-Kremlin on one hand, but also respectful of Georgian religious-national sentiments on the other. This was presented as a *competent balance*: SG's diverse team claimed it could unite the country's pro-Western aspirations with its traditional values, making them capable negotiators on the international stage who also understand domestic sensibilities. Their iconic campaign video – Khazaradze driving westward in a vintage car with patriotic music – perfectly encapsulated this message of *journeying to the West with Georgian pride intact*. By dramatising a literal drive "to the West," SG sought to prove its determination to

lead Georgia into Europe, while its patriotic overtones vouched for the coalition’s authenticity and authority to do so.

For Georgia (Gakharia) took a nuanced stance that tried to rise above the polarised “West vs. Russia” narrative. Gakharia consistently affirmed that EU integration was Georgia’s strategic goal – in fact, his campaign borrowed GD’s pro-Europe phrasing but added a twist: “to Europe with *real peace, real dignity*” (Civil.ge, 2024g). This implied that GD’s claim of keeping peace was hollow, and that only his team could genuinely secure peace *and* progress toward Europe. Unlike GD, Gakharia did not play up fear of war; unlike UNM, he did not call for confronting Russia head-on or making grand funding promises tied to EU accession. Instead, he projected a *moderate competence* on foreign policy. He often reminded voters that as Prime Minister, he had maintained constructive (if quiet) relations with Western partners and prevented escalation with Russia, presenting himself as a steady hand who knows how to say no to both extremes. Indeed, one slogan from his party was that peace would come by rejecting both GD and UNM, suggesting that those two rival camps’ perpetual fight was itself a threat to stability. This equidistant posture painted Gakharia’s team as the *rational adults in the room*, capable of improving EU relations (by meeting the reform criteria GD allegedly ignored) without the upheaval that might accompany a UNM return to power. Though short on flashy promises, For Georgia aimed to demonstrate foreign policy competence through Gakharia’s personal credibility: he regularly went on television to *defend his record and knowledge*, even facing tough questioning about his past (such as the controversial 2019 protest crackdown when he was the Interior Minister). By doing so, he tried to turn his experience, even the controversial episodes, into a testament of hard-earned expertise. The party’s limited resources meant fewer ads, but Gakharia’s ubiquitous appearances and calm, policy-focused rhetoric were meant to assure voters that with his leadership, Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic course would be safe and realistic. In sum, For Georgia reframed the geopolitical debate as not “war vs. peace” but “experienced pragmatism vs. hysteria,” presenting itself as the *competent, measured choice* for guiding Georgia Westward without turmoil.

Governance, Rule of Law, and Anti-Corruption

Another key theme was governance and the rule of law, often intertwined with Georgia’s prospects for EU accession, since the EU had set governance-related reform benchmarks. Each party claimed

it could govern more capably and honestly than its rivals, and many campaign pledges addressed corruption, justice, and institutional reform.

Georgian Dream faced accusations of democratic backsliding and state capture after over a decade in power. To counter this, GD tried to highlight areas of good governance under its tenure while discrediting the opposition's reform credentials. One subtle strategy GD employed was to tout improvements in public services and civil administration as evidence of its competent governance. For instance, GD spokespeople pointed to digitisation in public services and infrastructure upgrades as signs that state institutions were working better than under UNM. On the defensive side, GD warned of "*revanchism*" if the opposition won, claiming UNM and its allies would purge civil servants and politicise institutions in a revenge campaign. By casting itself as the protector of an impartial bureaucracy, GD implied it was the responsible manager of the state. However, GD's most visible governance-related messaging was negative: the infamous "no to agents" posters appeared in mid-campaign, depicting opposition leaders as foreign-sponsored agents on a leash. This was a direct reference to the controversial draft "foreign agent" law (widely seen as Kremlin-inspired) that GD had flirted with earlier. In essence, GD argued that *opposition parties were puppets of foreign forces or vested interests*, and thus could not be trusted to govern honestly. By contrast, GD presented itself as *patriotic and independent*, answerable only to the Georgian people. This claim was undermined in the eyes of many by GD's association with oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, but the party doubled down on portraying the *other side* as the corrupt and compromised one. For example, GD propagandistic videos labelled opponents as "pro-gay, anti-church" radicals destroying Georgian values, insinuating moral corruption in their governance approach. While such attacks were not policy proposals per se, they were central to GD's framing of competence: a morally corrupt opposition, GD suggested, could not lead the country well. Thus, in the governance domain, GD's self-portrayal was that of the *stable, experienced administration* that may not be perfect but is preferable to the chaos and vendettas the opposition would bring.

The opposition groups all campaigned on restoring the rule of law and reducing corruption, but each emphasised different aspects of governance reform. UNM-Unity focused on high-level anti-oligarch measures and justice for alleged wrongs under GD. A top pledge was to implement a "de-oligarchization" law to curb the influence of powerful private interests (widely understood as targeting Ivanishvili's role) in politics. UNM-Unity also promised to free what they called

“political prisoners” – foremost among them Mikheil Saakashvili, their imprisoned leader – signalling a turn from what they described as GD’s politicised justice back to an impartial rule of law. To demonstrate competence in governance, UNM-Unity leaned on its past *state-building experience*: in campaign debates, UNM veterans reminded voters how they had overhauled the police, tax, and public service systems in the 2004–2012 period. They argued that those successes (e.g. eradicating petty corruption, modernising public services) proved UNM knew how to govern effectively – and that they would apply the same technocratic zeal to meeting European standards now. At the same time, the inclusion of Strategy Agmashenebeli (led by Giorgi Vashadze, himself a former reformist official) brought a promise of fresh perspective within the alliance. Vashadze and others spoke of a one-year “technocratic government” as envisaged by the Georgian Charter to push through EU-required reforms quickly. By endorsing this idea, UNM-Unity tried to show it placed national interest and expertise above partisan politics – essentially saying, they would even share power with non-partisan experts for a year if that’s what it takes to fix the system. This was an attempt to bolster their credibility on governance. Overall, UNM-Unity’s narrative was that competent governance in Georgia had been interrupted in 2012, and that their return (augmented by new allies and a clear reform plan) would restore progress and justice.

The Coalition for Change emphasised governance reform perhaps more than any other theme. Their campaign repeatedly stressed dismantling the authoritarian tendencies of the current regime. A core promise in the CfC platform was the repeal of the “Russian law” and other anti-democratic legislation within days of taking office. This referred not only to the foreign agent bill, but broadly to reversing laws and practices seen as undermining civil society, media freedom, or judicial independence under GD. By foregrounding this in the 4-4-4 plan, CfC made clear that *democratic institutional repair* was priority number one. Leaders like Nika Melia and Nika Gvaramia vowed to reform the justice system – for example, by depoliticising judicial appointments and strengthening anti-corruption agencies – to fulfil EU accession criteria and restore public trust. In terms of self-presentation, the Coalition for Change portrayed itself as a *clean break* from both previous ruling parties (Netgazeti.ge, 2024). Their branding as entirely new (even if some leaders had past ties) was meant to signal clean governance. Campaign ads tongue-in-cheek promised “*new and clean leaders*” akin to a fresh detergent washing away old stains. This imagery resonated with voters tired of both GD’s and UNM’s scandals. The inclusion of Girchi – a party known for libertarian, anti-establishment ideas – also boosted CfC’s reformist credentials; Girchi leaders

often talked about cutting red tape and protecting individual freedoms as part of the coalition's governance vision. By the end of the campaign, CfC was pitching itself as a ready-made team of experts and activists who would swiftly enact European reforms and run a transparent government. The heavy social media component of their outreach (live Q&As, explanatory videos of their platform, etc.) illustrated their claim to *modern, accountable leadership*. In short, CfC framed good governance as *a job for a fresh, principled generation* and sought to prove its capability by demonstrating transparency and well-crafted plans even before Election Day.

Strong Georgia (SG) also advocated a governance reset, though its messaging here was somewhat less streamlined, reflecting the coalition's diversity. A unifying element was the pledge to implement the Georgian Charter reforms in full, in collaboration with other opposition forces. This entailed strengthening the rule of law and curbing elite corruption to meet EU standards. For example, SG candidates spoke about depoliticising key institutions (a point especially pushed by the Freedom Square movement educators in the team, who highlighted depoliticising schools and public sector roles). Ana Dolidze, a former law professor and one of SG's leaders, became the face of the coalition's rule-of-law platform – she conducted part of her campaign literally working on a scholarly project while riding a train, a stunt meant to underline her identity as a policy expert and clean politician. This was SG's way of signalling that it had *intellectual heft and integrity* in its ranks. Meanwhile, Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze (both businessmen-turned-politicians from Lelo) emphasised anti-corruption and economic transparency, noting their own experience in the private sector and civil society anti-corruption projects. They often cited the fact that Lelo's founders had faced politically motivated legal troubles from the GD government as evidence of GD's bad governance and their own resolve to fight it. Symbolically, SG's initial black-and-white ads showing *broken promises of past governments fading into the colour of a hopeful future* suggested that SG would end the era of lies and cronyism. However, SG had to carefully balance its criticism of GD and UNM (since it wanted to attract voters from both). Khazaradze sometimes noted that both previous governments disappointed people, casting SG as the competent *third way* that would not repeat those mistakes. By recruiting respected figures – even a former President (Giorgi Margvelashvili) endorsed them (Mtavari.tv, 2024) – Strong Georgia underscored a message of *experienced yet trustworthy governance*. While their governance promises did not grab headlines like some rivals', SG steadily projected the image of

a coalition that, by virtue of its members' varied backgrounds and commitment to Western norms, could govern more honestly and professionally than the status quo.

For Georgia (Gakharia) made anti-corruption a centrepiece of its identity. Gakharia's personal narrative – that as Prime Minister, he ran a “corruption-free island” in an otherwise compromised government – was repeated often. He claimed that under his brief leadership, Georgia had seen improved anti-graft metrics and that he had resigned in early 2021 precisely because GD's inner circle (implying Ivanishvili and others) were impeding reform and the rule of law. Through this story, Gakharia positioned himself as uniquely *principled and competent*: someone who both knew the system from inside and had the integrity to walk away when it went wrong. In the campaign, For Georgia promised to spare honest civil servants from political reprisals in the event of a change in government. This was an indirect way to court the public sector workforce and paint Gakharia as a responsible administrator. It also subtly criticised UNM, suggesting that if the main opposition took power, there might be witch-hunts in the bureaucracy, whereas Gakharia would ensure a professional, merit-based approach. In terms of concrete governance reforms, For Georgia's platform overlapped with other opposition groups (e.g. judicial reform, strengthening anti-monopoly regulations), but the party's tone was moderate. Rather than grand new laws, Gakharia often spoke about enforcing existing laws fairly and improving management of government agencies. His pledge of “*real dignity*” on the path to Europe implied cleaning up governance so that Georgia meets EU criteria sincerely, not just on paper. Lacking the resources for large rallies or ads, Gakharia used televised interviews and Facebook livestreams to delve into policy details, seemingly to prove he had serious plans. This low-key, policy-driven approach was meant to exhibit *technical competence*. By engaging voters in discussions about issues like property rights, police professionalism, or environmental permitting (topics he raised in Q&As), he sought to differentiate himself from the slogan-heavy campaigns of others. Ultimately, For Georgia's governance message was that integrity and expertise at the top would trickle down into cleaner, effective government. Gakharia essentially asked voters to trust his résumé and reformist break with GD as evidence that he could deliver a better-governed Georgia.

Projecting Leadership and Capability

Throughout the campaign, each of the five major contenders not only talked about policies but also carefully crafted an image of their leadership competence. This final section compares how they presented themselves, through leadership style, team composition, and campaign tactics, as the most capable choice to lead Georgia.

Georgian Dream relied heavily on the advantages of incumbency to project capability. Its leaders (like Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and GD chairman Irakli Kobakhidze) frequently pointed to GDP growth figures, new highways and hospitals, and the COVID-19 recovery as proof that GD “gets things done.” By showcasing these accomplishments, GD aimed to reinforce an image of *experienced administrators*. Moreover, GD’s extensive party machinery and financing allowed it to be first out of the gate in campaign advertising, literally dominating the public space with its banners and media presence. This saturation was itself a display of power and organisation, subtly conveying that GD was the only party with the capacity to govern at scale. However, GD’s competence narrative was undermined by its own shift toward fear-based messaging. The “War vs. Peace” billboards and attack ads could be seen as a *negative confidence* strategy: instead of saying “we are brilliant,” GD essentially said “the others are dangerously inept.” This played on public doubts about opposition leaders’ temperament and experience. For example, by depicting opposition figures as chaotic or extremist, GD implicitly argued that only it had the maturity to handle the grave responsibilities of governance. To some extent, this worked hand-in-hand with GD’s portrayal of itself as the peace guarantor – a role that implied sober, competent management of security and diplomacy. In public appearances, GD officials adopted a calm, often patronising tone toward challengers, again to signal that they were the *seasoned adults* and the opposition were untried agitators. While this strategy reinforced GD’s core strength (experience), it also highlighted a lack of fresh vision, an issue the opposition seized upon. Still, by Election Day, GD had successfully impressed upon many voters that it had a track record and a stable team, including bureaucrats and technocrats in the wings, whereas a vote for the opposition could bring uncertainty. This cautious appeal to stability was a deliberate effort to make *competence*, or at least continuity, the deciding factor in GD’s favour.

UNM-Unity capitalised on its legacy and passionate base to project competence in a different way. The presence of Mikheil Saakashvili loomed large: although imprisoned, his image and ideas were central to UNM’s campaign. Supporters waved posters of Saakashvili giving spirited salutes, and

the alliance constantly reminded the public of the transformational reforms achieved under his presidency. The message was that *the team that rebuilt Georgia before can do it again*. At the same time, UNM-Unity had to address concerns about its past mistakes and authoritarian excesses. To do so, it highlighted the *Unity* aspect – that this was not just the old UNM, but a broader, rejuvenated coalition. New prominent faces like Giorgi Vashadze, Anna Tsitlidze, and others were put forward as evidence that the party had learned and evolved. This balance of loyalty and renewal was crucial. UNM-Unity’s number on the ballot was 5, and it embraced the symbolism (“5 Goals, #5 on the ballot”), turning it into a rallying motif that implied focus and organisation. Visually and rhetorically, the alliance exuded energy: mass rallies with red flags and energetic speeches were meant to demonstrate a *resilient, mobilised force* ready to govern from day one. Indeed, UNM-Unity often spoke of having a detailed plan and even a shadow cabinet of experts prepared to step in. By emphasising concrete plans like the EU accession push and social programs, they aimed to counter GD’s portrayal of them as mere agitators. Additionally, UNM-Unity underscored its connections with international partners (European Parliament allies, Ukrainian leadership, etc.), suggesting that it had the *international support and know-how* to lead Georgia on the world stage. Finally, UNM-Unity’s blunt anti-Ivanishvili stance (“Get rid of Bidzina”) was a double-edged sword in terms of competence image: on one hand, it showed determination to remove what they called an opaque shadow ruler, but on the other, GD painted this as irresponsibly confrontational. The alliance attempted to show it could channel public anger into constructive change – essentially persuading voters that its fiery approach was backed by *real expertise and a clear program*, not just emotion. In summary, UNM-Unity projected itself as a *battle-tested yet forward-looking* leadership team, with deep experience in governance and an unwavering commitment to reversing Georgia’s democratic decline.

The Coalition for Change took an innovative approach to showcasing capability: they ran their campaign as if *they were already the government-in-waiting*. Observers noted that on the streets, CfC’s well-produced “Future Is Yours” banners and confident messaging made them look “like the one actually run by a ruling party”. This was intentional. The coalition’s four co-leaders (Nika Gvaramia, Nika Melia, Zurab Japaridze, and Elene Khoshtaria) often appeared together in a show of unity, discussing policy around tables or in town halls, to give the impression of a functional executive team. By broadcasting these images, they wanted voters to visualise CfC governing. Moreover, the use of creative campaign tactics – from viral TikTok videos of candidate Aleko

Elisashvili doing playful “flips” to humorous storytelling reels by young campaigners – served a strategic purpose beyond entertainment. It demonstrated that CfC understood modern communication and could engage younger citizens and urban professionals effectively. Mastery of media became a proxy for competence: a coalition that could run a savvy campaign, the implication went, could also run the country in a savvy, transparent way. Importantly, CfC was known to be well-funded (thanks in part to private donors and a strong grassroots fundraising), enabling it to mount a nationwide campaign structure rivalling GD’s. This fact alone helped argue their capability. In debates and interviews, CfC members spoke with specificity about policies (like the 4-4-4 plan), reinforcing the notion that *they had a roadmap* and weren’t just seeking power for its own sake. Even their critique of both GD and UNM was framed not merely as negativity but as *distance from past failures*, implying a higher competence untainted by either incumbent complacency or previous authoritarian tendencies. In essence, Coalition for Change’s strategy was to behave like a governing party before being in power, thereby convincing the electorate of its readiness and competence to lead.

Strong Georgia (SG) faced the challenge of proving the competency of a brand-new alliance composed of very different figures. They turned this diversity into a strength by highlighting the *professional credentials* of each major player. At campaign events, SG leaders often split roles: Mamuka Khazaradze would speak on economic development and big projects (drawing on his business background and his signature Anaklia Port project); Ana Dolidze would address legal reforms and education (from her academic and civic activist perspective); Aleko Elisashvili would connect with ordinary folk through his everyman charm and focus on municipal issues (as a former city council member); and others like Levan Tsutskiridze of Freedom Square would delve into policy specifics (like depoliticising schools, as educators). This issue-by-issue expertise gave the impression of a *competent cabinet* in the making. To bond these elements, SG crafted a narrative of unity in service of Georgia’s future. The campaign embraced creative symbolism to reinforce trust in their leadership: one memorable video featured Khazaradze driving a classic Ford Mustang westward across Georgia, literally steering towards Europe, while popular singers performed – a scene implying visionary leadership and patriotic fervour. In a tongue-in-cheek touch, Badri Japaridze (Khazaradze’s partner in Lelo) offered to babysit voters’ children on polling day so parents could vote, reprising a “men care” theme from an earlier election. This gesture humanised the SG leaders, portraying them as *responsible, caring, and relatable*. It suggested that these

successful businessmen were not aloof oligarchs but public-minded figures willing to do even mundane tasks for the civic good. Such imagery was aimed at building personal trust. SG also benefited from a form of external validation: President Salome Zourabichvili, although not running, implicitly endorsed uniting the pro-Western opposition and specifically encouraged an alliance between SG and Gakharia's party as a "third force". While a formal merger with Gakharia did not materialise, the very fact of the President's initiative cast SG as a pivotal, responsible actor in the opposition landscape. It positioned Strong Georgia as a *serious contender whose participation was vital for Georgia's democratic rescue*. By the end of the campaign, SG's multifaceted approach – combining policy substance, symbolic leadership, and broad alliances – helped it argue that it had both the *vision and the team* to govern competently. Voters were encouraged to see Strong Georgia as a coalition of seasoned reformers and fresh thinkers, uniquely equipped to tackle Georgia's problems from multiple angles.

Finally, Gakharia's For Georgia centred almost entirely on the persona and record of Giorgi Gakharia himself to project competence. In many ways, the party *was* Gakharia – its branding, colour (purple), and messaging revolved around his image as a no-nonsense, effective manager. Lacking the funds for a lavish campaign, Gakharia compensated with sheer personal engagement: he tirelessly toured regions, held small meetings, and appeared on various media, effectively making himself the message. This approach conveyed authenticity and hard work. It also allowed him to directly address the controversies of his tenure (like the June 2019 protest crackdown) and recast them as lessons learned, thereby disarming some criticism and demonstrating accountability. A recurrent theme in his addresses was *national unity and moderation*. He presented himself as a rare figure who had good relations with all sides – Russia, the West, different factions in Georgia – yet was beholden to none. By stressing that he did "not belong to either of the polar camps", Gakharia attempted to appear above partisan incompetence. The campaign's low-budget, grassroots nature ironically became part of its competent image: pictures of Gakharia in shirt-sleeves, talking to farmers or teachers, or setting up his own microphones for a community gathering, all suggested a leader who is *hands-on and pragmatic*. The party also touted the many *mid-level officials and technocrats* who had joined its ranks from GD – mayors, city councillors, even MPs who believed in Gakharia's leadership. This allowed For Georgia to claim it had an existing network of knowledgeable people to run local and central government (a critical aspect of governing capacity). In policy discussions, Gakharia favoured a measured, data-driven tone, often

saying “we must acknowledge our mistakes” and “we have to plan realistically.” This sober rhetoric was intended to contrast with the grand promises and fiery declarations of other parties, further underlining *technocratic competence*. Essentially, For Georgia asked the electorate to focus on Gakharia’s character and experience: *if you trust him as an honest, capable leader, then trust his party to govern well*. By leveraging his relatively high personal approval (he was seen by some polls as one of the more liked political figures), Gakharia managed to carve out a niche as the *competent former insider* offering an alternative to both the ruling party and the traditional opposition.

Part 4 - Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Georgian political parties employed foreign policy narratives during the 2024 parliamentary election campaign. By systematically analysing party manifestos, speeches, debates, social-media posts and other campaign materials, the thesis has delivered on its promise: it has clearly answered the research question of how parties framed foreign policy to appeal to voters and delegitimise rivals. For instance, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) consistently presented itself as the guarantor of peace, invoking images of war-torn Ukraine to emphasise its own role in keeping Georgia out of conflict. In contrast, opposition coalitions framed the election as a choice between Western integration and Russian influence. In this way, the study directly shows how each party's messages used foreign-policy content strategically – for example, by linking EU accession with national identity or by framing opponents as security risks. In sum, foreign policy was treated by all parties as an existential referendum on Georgia's future, exactly as suggested by framing theory and constructivist perspectives. These findings confirm that the study fully answered its core question.

The empirical expectations of the study were largely confirmed. Parties aligned with pro-Western orientations (such as the Coalition for Change and Unity–National Movement) indeed emphasised identity and values frames connecting Georgia with Europe, diagnosing threats in Russia and corruption. Conversely, the ruling party emphasised competency and security frames, depicting itself as the only guardian against a “war-or-peace” choice. Notably, all major parties publicly affirmed support for EU membership, which matches the expectation (and broader public opinion) that European integration is a unifying theme even amid partisan conflict. The analysis also confirmed that delegitimation frames were widely used: parties routinely painted rivals as “pro-Russian” or “Western puppets” to undermine their legitimacy. In these ways, the content analysis validated the theoretical expectation that framing patterns would correlate with each party's ideological stance and strategic goals. In effect, each of the study's hypotheses about narrative alignment with party identity and polarisation found support in the data.

At the same time, several notable findings and limitations emerged. An unexpected insight was the depth of consensus on pro-European rhetoric: even Georgian Dream, despite its later criticisms of EU conditionality, maintained a public commitment to EU accession. This suggests that,

contrary to a simple pro-Russia versus pro-West cleavage, all elite actors had to pay lip service to Western integration. On the other hand, the study's qualitative approach revealed the intense polarisation of discourse. In practice, there was little neutral space for cross-party debate – parties largely “talked past” each other in highly partisan media environments. As a result, each camp pushed its own narrative without substantive rebuttal from the other side. This polarisation is both a finding and a limitation: it means our analysis captured clear contrasting narratives, but it also meant we rarely observed genuine in-campaign dialogue or compromise. Another shortcoming is methodological: the research was confined to publicly available materials, and some parties (notably GD and the UNM) did not provide written responses to questionnaires, forcing reliance on secondary sources for those narratives. Finally, although domestic issues like unemployment and debt were severe, this election was nevertheless dominated by foreign-policy themes – a dynamic that the study documents but did not originally anticipate in its design. These constraints should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings.

The implications of this study point toward several avenues for future research. Researchers could extend this work by comparing the 2024 case with other elections in Georgia or similar democracies to see how stable these framing patterns are over time and across contexts. Quantitative content analysis or survey experiments could test the *impact* of identified frames, for example, by measuring voter responses to “peace vs. war” versus “Europe vs. Russia” messaging. Another fruitful direction would be to study the role of media and digital platforms in amplifying (or attenuating) these frames, since this study focused on party sources only. The apparent elite consensus on European integration also raises questions: future research could investigate why parties feel compelled to maintain a pro-EU stance despite practical divergences, and how this aligns with public opinion. Finally, given the observed lack of cross-party engagement, scholars might examine what institutional or societal conditions could create more balanced debate, such as neutral forums or media reforms.

The findings also hold practical value for scholars, analysts and practitioners. For academics, this thesis provides a detailed case study that enriches theories of political communication and constructivist IR by showing how narrative competition plays out in a polarised electoral campaign. It offers a systematic coding scheme and empirical data that others can build on. For observers and journalists, the identified framing patterns serve as a lens for monitoring future

elections: knowing that GD frames security as peace, while the opposition invokes European values, helps interpret campaign rhetoric and detect new variations on these themes.

For policymakers, campaigners and civil-society groups, the results suggest how different appeals resonate with Georgian audiences. For example, the strong “peace” framing by GD demonstrates that messages emphasising stability can be electorally potent. Conversely, NGOs or opposition strategists might focus on values-based messaging about democracy and rights, which historically rallied public support. Recognising the high salience of foreign policy in this election (even over domestic issues) means that international actors should communicate carefully: any policy moves may quickly become politicised.

In summary, this study has met its objectives by revealing *how* Georgian parties used foreign-policy narratives, largely confirming its hypotheses and uncovering a few surprises about elite consensus and campaign dynamics. The research bridges the promised link between constructivist framing theory and real-world politics, laying the groundwork for future inquiry into narrative-driven campaigns. By highlighting which frames dominated the 2024 election (and which did not), it provides a roadmap for anyone seeking to understand or influence how foreign policy is discussed in Georgian (and similar) political arenas.

Key takeaways and implications: The analysis shows that the 2024 campaign was defined by competing referenda-style narratives (war vs. peace; Europe vs. Russia). It confirmed that each party’s foreign-policy framing aligned with its identity and strategy, and it pointed out that deep media polarisation limited dialogue. Future research should test these patterns in other settings and consider voters’ perceptions directly. For scholars, the case offers a rich example of framing theory in action; for observers, it offers concrete categories to decode campaign messaging; and for practitioners, it suggests which appeals (stability/security vs. values/integration) are likely to mobilise different segments of the Georgian electorate. These lessons can inform both academic inquiry and the practice of political communication and election monitoring in Georgia and beyond.

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