

# A Game of Georgian Chicken

One of the most well-known dishes in the cuisine of Georgia, the small former Soviet Republic located on the Black Sea, is chicken tabaka. Chicken tabaka is made by flattening a chicken and then grilling it. This delicious dish has also, unfortunately, become an apt metaphor for the state of Georgian democracy, which been flattened to the point where there is widespread political repression, little media freedom and a climate of fear permeating political life. In recent days [reports and videos of horrific abuses in Georgian prisons have come to light](#), further demonstrating the nature of life in Georgia today. It turns out, not surprisingly, that flattening is a better approach to cooking a chicken than to developing democracy.

Currently, with major parliamentary elections less than two weeks away, the Georgian government is playing game of chicken. This one, unlike chicken tabaka, does not involve cooking, will not end well, and is being played for high stakes. It consists of a challenge from the Georgian government to the West to see who will blink first. In the months leading up to the October 1st election numerous international observers, election monitors and foreign diplomats and leaders have commented that the current electoral environment is not conducive to fair elections, and [have expressed concerns accordingly](#). The prison abuse scandal, which is widespread and particularly devastating in a country like Georgia, which has one of the [highest incarceration rates in the world](#), although not a partisan issue, has made the political environment even more tense, weakening support for the ruling United National Movement (UNM) party and making widespread election fraud even more necessary for the UNM to ensure victory for themselves.

Rather than address the issues such as access to media or harassment of opposition activists directly, or even to defend itself, the Georgian government has instead constructed an argument that the main opposition forces, a coalition of Western-oriented diplomats, former allies of Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, and others led by businessman and philanthropist Bidzina Ivanishvili, are preparing to claim the election has been stolen, organize rallies and demand Western intervention in their behalf.

This position has been summarized by Georgian National Security Advisor Giga Bokeria, who recently [stated](#), "One can speculate that [Ivanishvili] is gearing up to a situation where if and when he will lose in free and fair elections he will claim that votes were stolen and prepare for the street." By doing this, the Georgian government seeks not to become more democratic, but to undermine the opposition and make it harder for them to make the case that the election was marred by fraud.

According to their plan, after the election, the Georgian government will, in the face of inevitable complaints by the opposition about election fraud, simply say that the opposition has been complaining for months and was never going to see the election as legitimate. This is a convincing argument with an internal, if circular, logic of its own. It also ignores the most salient fact of the likely post-election dialogue. The opposition will be complaining about election fraud because, barring dramatic and immediate changes, the election will have occurred in a fraudulent, unfree and non-democratic manner.

Thus, the Georgian government has, recklessly, made it clear that they will steal the election if necessary while daring anybody to stop them. As in a game of chicken, the Georgian government is racing its metaphorical car directly towards another car and has indicated it will neither stop nor turn the steering wheel. The U.S. and Europe, who, so to speak, are behind the wheel of the other car, have indicated, albeit with some equivocation, that they want fair elections in Georgia and will be watching the election closely.

Either the Georgian government has to turn the steering wheel by allowing better elections, or the West has to turn the wheel by looking the other way when election fraud occurs. Looking the other way, would support the Georgian government's surreal assertion that the main problem in Georgia is not the absence of free and fair election, but simply that the political opposition complains too much. This assertion is *prima facie* absurd, but it remains possible that the West will pursue this course.

The other option for the West would be not to back down and, after the election, support opposition claims about election fraud, making it necessary to question the legitimacy of the election, leading to a clash between the oncoming Georgian and Western cars. The outcome of this clash cannot be predicted, but would likely not end well for the Georgian government and could potentially cause problems for numerous Western politicians.

This obviously places the West in a difficult position, as their two options are to either chicken out and ignore near-certain election fraud in Georgia or to confront the election fraud knowing that the Georgian government will dig in and deny those charges. The former option will make the U.S. and Europe look bad and further undermine their credibility as arbiters and supporters of democracy, while the latter option could lead to instability in Georgia and potentially the region. The window for intervening and demanding fair elections in Georgia is closing quickly. When it closes, there will be no winning strategy for the West in this game of Georgian chicken.