

Russian Propaganda Narratives in Georgia

On March 26, Georgia qualified for the Euro 2024 Football Finals for the first time in its history, and the nation went ecstatic. The bitter polarization that had plagued the country for the last decade seemed to be gone - at least during the brief period of joy.

But in just a matter of days, the Georgian Dream returned to the disciplined message box, straight from the Kremlin playbook: protecting family values, targeting NGOs, and claiming that Georgians must be ruled by Georgia and not the West.

The mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, a former AC Milan star, [snuck](#) in the well-known line - the sport's success is the result of the peace that the government of Georgia has managed to maintain, despite the attempts of the global war party to drag Georgia into the war with Russia. The line of peaceful Georgia, being the credit of the ruling party, is a major propaganda instrument, as Thornike Gordadze explained elsewhere in this volume.

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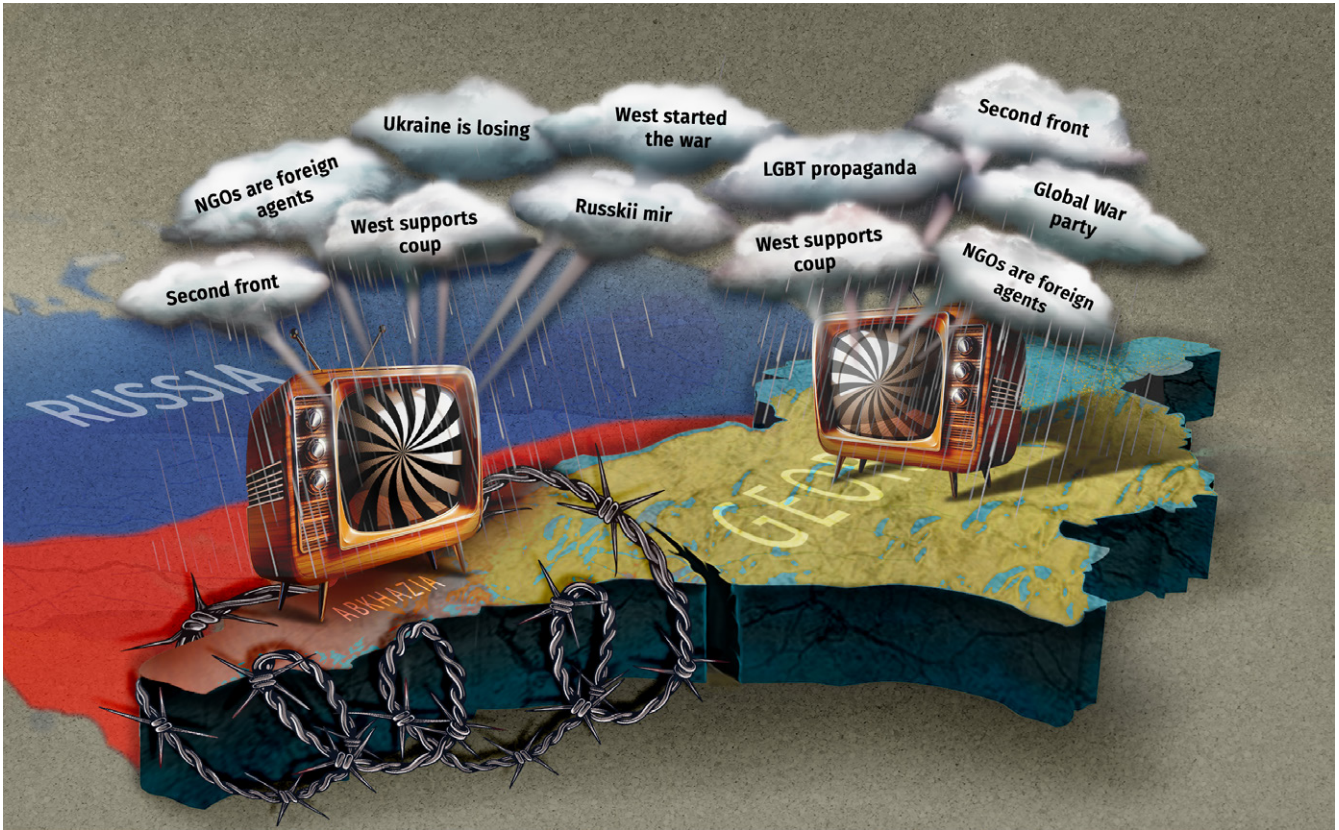
According to these simple, efficient, and debilitating propaganda lines, Western integration is incompatible with and dangerous for Christian identity, history, religion, and traditions. The cornerstone of this account is the fight against "LGBT propaganda" to prevent "Gayropa" from forcing same-sex marriage on "normal people."

The Kremlin also promotes the narrative that the West uses various agents of influence subservient to US and EU interests. NGOs and media organi-



SERGI KAPANADZE
Editor and Contributor

Dr Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International relations and European integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. He is a founder and a chairman of the board of the Tbilisi - based think - tank GRASS (Georgia's Reforms Associates). Dr Kapanadze was a vice - speaker of the Parliament of Georgia in 2016 - 2020 and a deputy Foreign Minister in 2011 - 2012. He received a Ph.D. in International relations from the Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.



zations are among such agents. They do not serve the interests of the people, government, or society in general but their foreign masters, who finance them and give them instructions to destabilize the domestic institutions.

Another propaganda line pushed by the Kremlin concerns the West's intervention in domestic affairs, imposing its rules without considering local traditions, institutions, and the principle of sovereignty. This is rooted in Russia's sovereign democracy concept, articulated in 2006, which rests on two tenets: that the country employing it is a democracy and that no one from outside should question it.

The Kremlin also pushes the narrative that the West is trying to subvert the governments that are friendly to Moscow. The foreign-instigated "color revolutions" conspiracy is already 24 years old, starting when Serbs dethroned Slobodan Milošević in 2000, Georgians ousted Eduard Shevardnadze in 2003, and Ukrainians removed Viktor Yanukovich in 2004. Ukrainian Euro-Maidan and

the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2024 gave a new life to the foreign interference storyline.

Kremlin narratives and instruments are similar, targeting the conflict-split Georgian society, relying on the usual proliferators and the local authorities, not just in Tbilisi, but also in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali.

All of these typical Kremlin narratives are used in Georgia. The ruling Georgian Dream party and smaller but loud pro-Russian forces and propagandists advocate these messages in a coordinated and organized manner. Conversely, exactly the same propaganda is also observable in the Russian-occupied Georgian regions - Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These regions are almost impermeable to Western attention. However, a close look at the political developments in these regions and social media makes it clear that the Kremlin narratives and instruments are similar, targeting the conflict-split Georgian society, relying on the usu-

al proliferators and the local authorities, not just in Tbilisi, but also in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali.

Anti-LGBT Propaganda

The anti-LGBT narrative is a pinnacle of Kremlin propaganda. The most vulnerable sexual minority groups are the easy targets for the Kremlin in those countries, where conservative ideology, Orthodoxy, and Soviet mentality create fertile ground for demonizing sexual minorities.

Historically, in both the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia, sexual identity and sexual minorities have faced persecution. Under Soviet rule, the state sought to eradicate any form of sexual expression that deviated from heterosexual norms, viewing it as a threat to the stability of the socialist society. Homosexuality was deemed a bourgeois perversion and a symptom of Western decadence, with the government employing a range of tactics to suppress it. Soviet authorities subjected LGBTQI+ individuals to imprisonment, forced psychiatric treatment, and even execution under laws criminalizing “sodomy” and “propaganda of homosexuality.” This repression fostered a climate of fear and forced many LGBTQI+ people to conceal their identities to avoid persecution, contributing to a culture of silence and invisibility.

Russia continued Soviet hostility towards sexual minorities, and the Kremlin has implemented legislation that further marginalized and stigmatized LGBTQI+ individuals, such as the infamous “LGBT propaganda law” enacted in 2013, which, among others, prohibits the dissemination of information on LGBTQI+ issues. This legislation has emboldened discrimination and violence against sexual minorities, perpetuating a culture of intolerance and discrimination. Furthermore, state-sponsored rhetoric and media portrayals often depict LGBTQI+ individuals as morally corrupt and a threat to traditional Russian values, exacerbat-

ing social prejudice and hindering efforts toward equality and acceptance.

In Georgia, the LGBTQI+ community started to actively advocate for its rights in the early 2010s, with several civil society organizations and political parties finding the strength to publicly support the LGBTQI+ rights to expression and assembly. This awakening gave the Georgian authorities room to instrumentalize the issue to their political benefit.

On 17 May 2013, when gay rights activists held the rally in the center of Tbilisi, thousands of protesters, organized by the Orthodox priests and condoned by the government, [broke through](#) a police cordon and violently pursued them, beating and throwing stones. On 5 July 2021, Tbilisi Pride was [prevented](#) from holding the March for Dignity by a mob of violent activists convened by the Georgian Orthodox Church and again condoned by the government. Then Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili effectively gave the green light to the violence when he called on Pride to reconsider the march, citing potential disorder as a reason. Far-right activists took this as a sign of *carte blanche* and assaulted the offices of LGBTQI+ and other civil society organizations, beating up dozens of journalists, as a result of which over 30 journalists were injured, and one died several days later. In July 2023, Tbilisi Pride only [held](#) a private event, unwilling to further polarize the society with the contentious issue; however, the radical far-right groups once again invaded them, forcing the evacuation. The footage of the police allowing the violent mob through the police cordon and even showing them around the facilities, explaining that no gays were hiding anywhere, were the highlights of this shameful act of vandalism.

The lesson that the Georgian Dream learned from these episodes was that LGBT demonization could bring political benefits. The 2024 election year is marked by a clear [campaign](#) strategy that prop-

agates that protecting family values (from LGBT) and limiting gay propaganda (or, as the GD calls it, pseudo-liberal propaganda) are the most important issues in today's Georgia.

On 25 March 2024, Mamuka Mdinardze, leader of the Georgian Dream parliamentary majority, [unveiled](#) plans for two draft constitutional laws aimed at safeguarding family values and minors. These initiatives include an amendment to Article 30 of the Georgian Constitution, focusing on marriage rights and maternal-child relations, with proposed provisions restricting same-sex unions and gender-related medical interventions. Additionally, Mdinardze outlined stringent regulations targeting gatherings, distribution of materials, and educational content promoting non-heterosexual relationships or gender reassignment. This announcement followed a prior public declaration to draft an “anti-LGBT propaganda” law aiming at stirring the discussion in society, putting liberal groups, CSOs, and opposition parties on the defensive.

The proposed amendments are tailored to change the constitution for prosaic reasons - if they were simple law, the GD would pass them easily, as they hold the majority in the Parliament. However, if the changes are constitutional, they will have to be supported by the opposition. Thus, if they fail because of the lack of opposition votes, the label of “LGBT supporters” will be easily hung on the opposition.

Georgian Dream leaders [claim](#) that the initiated law against “LGBT propaganda” is a common national cause and must be urgently addressed. According to Papuashvili, the issue should be tackled immediately, as no one thought five to ten years ago that the Prime Minister of the UK would need to clarify “that a man is a man and a woman is a woman.”

Shielding Georgian society from the “malign in-

fluence of LGBT” and protecting children from “LGBT propaganda” is explained by the necessity to protect the “interests of the majority.” Former Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili [used](#) this line of argument at the 2023 Budapest CPAC forum, also known as the ‘anti-LGBT forum.’ “We are protecting the rights of the majority, for whom the family is a union of man and woman, for whom the woman is a mother and a man is a father,” – asserted Gharibashvili. Protecting the majority from the minority is also an often-used argument by Moscow.

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The intention of the ruling party is clear – making the 2024 elections not about the economy, EU integration, and relations with Russia but about conservative values, family, and LGBT propaganda. The rationale behind this is also clear – if the Georgian Dream directly juxtaposes itself vis-à-vis European integration, it stands no chance of winning. But if the positioning is about protecting family values from gay propaganda, then they can further polarize society and maintain power.

Anti-NGO Propaganda

Another prominent Kremlin narrative is the subversive nature of the non-governmental organizations and their activities against the state institutions. Over the past two decades, Russia has increasingly targeted civil society organizations through various legal and administrative measures, constraining their activities and limiting their ability to operate independently. Since the

early 2000s, the Russian government has implemented laws and regulations that subject NGOs to extensive scrutiny, bureaucratic hurdles, and surveillance. The 2012 “foreign agents” law, for instance, requires NGOs that receive foreign funding and engage in broadly defined “political activities” to register as “foreign agents,” a term laden with negative connotations from the Soviet era. This label not only tarnishes the reputation of NGOs but also imposes burdensome reporting requirements and exposes them to potential harassment and intimidation from state authorities.

Moreover, the Russian government has utilized various tactics to suppress NGOs deemed critical or oppositional. Raids, inspections, and legal proceedings have been employed to intimidate activists and organizations, often under the guise of combating extremism or protecting national security. High-profile cases, such as the dissolution of the prominent human rights group Memorial in 2021 and the arrest of activists from organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, illustrate the extent of state interference in civil society.

The Georgian Dream has been utilizing the same approach against the Georgian CSOs for almost two years now. Last March, the attempt to pass the “foreign agents law,” in the best Russian traditions, was prevented by the protest of local civil society and youth; however, the campaign against the NGOs has not stopped. NGOs are continuously called foreign agents. Since the start of 2024, there has not been a single week during which GD leaders have not slammed, attacked, or slandered civil society organizations. The Chairperson of the Parliament most frequently leads the attacks.

The leader of the Parliamentary Majority, Mamuka Mdinardze, [called](#) last year’s protests against the Foreign Agents Law the “farce of the century.” Mayor of Tbilisi and Secretary General of the Georgian Dream, Kakha Kaladze, recently [stated](#) that

CSOs have transformed into political parties that operate against the government. Georgian Dream leaders most frequently attack the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), and USAID, which are blamed for supporting the NGOs and which are critical of the government. When the news broke in March 2024 that the US was decreasing Georgia’s financing, the GD leaders, including the Prime Minister, welcomed the news and expressed the hope that the funding of the “rich NGOs” would be cut. The Parliament’s Chairperson even [stated](#) that there is a whole scheme set up to fund Georgian politicians through fake CSOs, which directly interferes with electoral processes.

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These attacks against Georgian CSOs contradict the EU’s request to see more active engagement with Georgian CSOs when implementing the nine steps necessary for opening the accession talks. However, the Georgian Dream leaders feel comfortable with this contradiction. After all, last year, they almost passed the law obliging CSOs to register as foreign agents, and Georgia still received EU candidate status.

Narrative of Sovereign Democracy

The concept of sovereign democracy emerged in Russia in the early 2000s, championed by Vladimir Putin and his supporters as a response to the perceived failures of Western-style liberal democracy. Sovereign democracy emphasizes the primacy of state sovereignty and national interests while prioritizing stability and order over Western-driven individual rights and freedoms. The concept has

evolved over time, becoming increasingly synonymous with centralized control and authoritarian tendencies and also acquiring a central role in Russian propaganda against the West.

The Georgian Dream embraces this narrative just as eagerly as other prominent Kremlin narratives. Statements about the unacceptability of foreign intervention in domestic affairs, particularly from the EU, are abundant, especially after the EU granted Georgia candidate status. The concept of sovereign democracy, in essence, rejects any criticism of democracy from outside powers. For Georgia, whose EU candidate status envisages numerous scrutinies of democracy, such an approach is incredibly dangerous and places risks on the European integration path. However, to alleviate this contradiction, the Georgian Dream has devised the slogan – “with honor to Europe,” emphasizing that they would enter the EU on their terms without undertaking the reforms they consider degrading (read ‘challenging their grip on power’). “Georgia should be governed by the Georgian people, not foreigners,” is the [position](#) of the Parliament’s Chairperson when he responds to the European criticism of the lack of reforms.

On 13 March 2024, prominent Georgian CSOs – Transparency International – Georgia, the Georgian Democracy Initiative, Courtwatch, Democracy Defenders, and the Civil Society Foundation released a joint [statement](#) calling for the vetting and integrity check of Georgian judges. The coalition of the Georgian CSOs, which is monitoring the implementation of the nine conditions necessary for starting the accession talks, also [believes](#) that vetting of judges is important for achieving judicial independence. Problems in the Georgian judiciary are widely known and reported by credible international partners. The US government even [put](#) several influential judges on the visa ban list who are believed to be part of a judiciary clan that projects the political interests of the ruling party in the court system. “By refusing to check the integrity of

the members of the clan in the Georgian justice system, the government is hindering the European integration process” – was the assessment of Georgian CSOs. In response, the Chairperson of the Parliament [accused](#) the CSOs of undermining the Georgian justice system and [attacking](#) Georgia’s sovereignty. “This is the malign influence of foreign funding,” Papuashvili responded.

The Georgian Dream is now shielding any call for significant reforms from the EU by using the argument of sovereignty and preventing foreign interference. “This is Georgia; this is not a place where you can conduct experiments; this is not a country that some losers can direct,” [claimed](#) one spokesman of the Georgian Dream. The parliamentary leader of the GD, Mamuka Mdinardze, even [pledged](#) that the ruling party would not take into account any recommendations from the Venice Commission or any other institution that was directed against Georgia, its democratic elections, and its sovereignty. Mdinardze also [said](#) that it was unacceptable for the ruling party to let foreign countries, “no matter friends or foes,” conduct vetting of the judiciary.

According to the “sovereign democracy” narrative, foreign influence determines all actions of the political oppositions and even President Salome Zourabichvili, who has fallen out of the Georgian Dream’s favor. For example, when the President pardoned opposition politicians and a media manager, the government could only explain it with the foreign *diktat*. The Parliament’s Chairperson directly [claimed](#) that the pardoning of Nika Gvaramia in 2023 and Nika Melia in 2021 (who now jointly created a new opposition party – Ahali) was due to the interference of “foreign political groups.” Every time European politicians express interest in pardoning or releasing former President Saakashvili, this concept of sovereign democracy and non-intervention in domestic affairs is used as a shield by the Georgian Dream.

Foreign Subversion Conspiracy

Russia has long asserted that the West, particularly the United States, is actively engaged in efforts to destabilize the Russian government by supporting what it terms “color revolutions” across the globe. These assertions gained traction, particularly in the aftermath of the 2014 Euromaidan in Kyiv and the 2020 protests in Belarus, events that Russia viewed as orchestrated attempts by Western powers to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Moscow often portrays these uprisings as part of a broader strategy aimed at encroaching upon Russian spheres of influence and promoting Western interests at the expense of Russian stability.

A similar narrative has been adopted by the Georgian Dream. For the Georgian authorities, opposition parties are preparing a revolution or a coup d'état and are, therefore, radical. In September 2023, the Georgian State Security Service “exposed” three Serbian civil activists who allegedly came to Georgia to train civil society organizations with the intent of orchestrating the violent overthrow of Georgia’s government. Russian propaganda channels in Georgia, like *Sezoni TV*, regularly [pursue](#) the same line. The resignation of the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs of the United States, Victoria Nuland, gave another spark to this narrative. Nuland, who is blamed for orchestrating the Euromaidan, was [attacked](#) by the pro-Russian media in Georgia.

The Georgian Dream almost never uses the term “opposition” without linking the adjective “radical” to it. This “radical opposition” is portrayed as violent, “revengeful,” and non-democratic – a standard message box by the Kremlin. Throughout the last 12 years of the Georgian Dream’s power, numerous investigations have been launched, targeting opposition politicians for attempting to overthrow the government. None of them led to

any arrests since the goal of this propaganda line is not to detain the politicians (they can be arrested for other wrongdoings) but to grow the seed of resentment towards the “radical opposition.”

Similarities with the Narratives in Abkhazia

It is remarkable that the local authorities in Russian-occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia also use similar narratives as the government of Georgia. Abkhazia is under increased pressure from Moscow to “Russianize” its “legislation,” allowing Russia to all but annex this occupied region. Recently, the Russian-grown de facto foreign minister, Inal Ardzinba, launched a campaign against the local Abkhaz NGOs, pressing them to stop any contact with Georgian counterparts or engage in any confidence-building activities. The draft law on foreign agents is ready and will be heard by the local parliament at any moment. Despite having resisted the pressure to pass the law, which was passed in South Ossetia in 2014, now it [seems](#) that the Abkhaz parliament will succumb, too.

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Abkhazian civil society strongly opposes the foreign agents’ bill, with approximately 400 activists and non-governmental organizations [urging](#) its rejection in an open letter to the de facto authorities. They argued that the bill’s designation of organizations as “foreign agents” discriminated against civil society and infringed upon citizens’ fundamental rights. Inal Ardzinba warned of po-

tential repercussions on international organizations and local NGOs receiving EU funding, hinting at possible expulsions. In 2024, Russian border guards started to stop dissenting Abkhaz activists at the border, making them know that Moscow was discontent with their resistance.

Abkhaz de facto authorities are also attacking foreign donors. Mr. Ardzinba even restricted US-AID-funded UNDP projects and [declared](#) the head of the USAID program in Georgia *persona non grata*. Other international NGOs, such as the Berghof Foundation of Germany and Action Against Hunger, have also been attacked. The Abkhaz de facto ministry of foreign affairs often posts Russian propaganda narratives through its Telegram Channel, copying Moscow's talking points on Western interference in the domestic affairs of European states, including Georgia.

LGBT propaganda is also actively used to discredit the West. In 2023, the de facto Abkhaz Ministry of Foreign Affairs decried the cooperation of several Abkhaz citizens with one of the media outlets that was banned in Russia because of LGBT propaganda. The Abkhaz MFA spokesperson said that cooperation with the media agency, propagating the LGBT culture and contradicting the national identity, culture, and historical values of the Abkhaz nation, was unacceptable.

The Dilemma for the EU

The usage of Russian propaganda narratives by the Georgian Dream has one peculiarity – these steps are still justified by arguing that the EU (and the US) have similar policies. This, known generally as a policy of “whataboutism,” illustrates that Georgian authorities cannot fully make an anti-European shift, aware that the majority of the population is staunchly supporting European integration. For instance, when the “foreign agents” draft bill was introduced, GD leaders referred to “similar” laws

in the US and lobbying legislation in the EU. When the Georgian NGOs' transparency is questioned, the statements by the MEPs about the necessity to regulate the funding of the European NGOs are quoted. When the suggestions of the EU on judicial and other reforms are denied, the usual rhetorical question is asked – does the EU have similar laws? When LGBT propaganda was introduced, examples limiting the rights of sexual minorities were brought from Italy, Lithuania, and Hungary.

The EU, therefore, faces a dilemma: how to respond to the Georgian government's anti-European turn. On the one hand, it is clear that such narratives by the Georgian government undermine European values and jeopardize the Georgian population's aspiration to join the EU. Qualification for Euro 2024 probably increased further the already 80%+ support for European integration. On the other hand, if the EU starts to contradict every anti-European statement and step that the Georgian Dream makes or takes, it risks falling into the GD's propaganda trap. Indeed, if the EU makes it clear that passing the discriminatory LGBT propaganda law is a red line for the EU, the GD will argue that this is exactly what they wanted to prove – that they will resist European pressure to impose gay marriage. On the other hand, if the EU mutes its response, those pro-European forces in Georgia, who want to make sure that the country does not stumble on the accession path, will be weakened. And their weakness might open doors for more anti-European legislation and increased Russian control.

There is no easy way out of this dilemma, especially since the EU, in contrast with the Kremlin propaganda narrative, does not want or plan to intervene in Georgia's domestic affairs. Many European politicians believe that if they continue openly decrying the steps and narratives of the Georgian Dream, they will reinforce the opposition parties. And doing so in an election year is considered unethical.

In a similar vein, if the EU continues viewing Georgia's progress towards the EU through only a "merit-based more for more" prism, it risks leaving Georgia behind Ukraine and Moldova in Russia's den. This is precisely why Georgia was granted the EU candidate status - geopolitics trumped merit-based consideration.

The EU needs to become more vocal in 2024, despite its own elections in June. The only way the EU can help reverse this anti-European narrative in Georgia is by making it clear that there are red lines which, once crossed, will make it impossible for Georgia to join the EU.

But, maybe, for a change, the EU needs to become more vocal in 2024, despite its own elections in June. The only way the EU can help reverse this

anti-European narrative in Georgia is by making it clear that there are red lines which, once crossed, will make it impossible for Georgia to join the EU.

Maybe explaining to the Georgian public, in advance of the October 2024 elections, that the anti-European actions of the Georgian government are jeopardizing the country's European integration prospects could be an answer. Maybe, for once, the EU actually needs to "interfere" in Georgian domestic politics, not in the way Russia or the Georgian government blames it, through covert operations and alleged coups, but through a democratic, transparent process - clear statements, assessments, and verdicts. After all, the Georgian people deserve and probably want to know whether the current embrace of Russian propaganda narratives by the government of Georgia is distancing Georgia from the EU or bringing it closer ■