

# Who Are You, Uncle Sam?!

## Georgia's Liberals Struggle with U.S. Ideological Drift

**O**n 22 March, hundreds of Georgians took to the streets to show their support for the [MEGOBARI Act](#)—a bipartisan bill that seeks to sanction the ruling Georgian Dream party for its alleged anti-democratic practices. The MEGOBARI Act targets a regime accused of constitutional overreach, election rigging, and the suppression of dissent. Yet, a call to hold Georgia's government accountable for its authoritarian tendencies is emerging at a time when the U.S. political class itself is grappling with the erosion of long-standing democratic conventions by Donald Trump's administration.

This convergence of domestic and U.S. crises of democracy could not come at a worse time for Georgia where the ideas of freedom and individual rights were so firmly rooted in the cultural affinity of the liberal political elite with the United States.

### Anchored In the U.S. No More?

The genesis of modern Georgian democratic culture and political class is deeply entwined with the U.S. In part, this anchoring is a curious by-product of the post-Soviet nation's yearning for a complete break from the oppressive legacies of the past.

For decades, Georgian elites viewed America as the emblem of individualism, freedom, progress, and modernity—a stark contrast to the repressive, centralized power structures known from Soviet rule. The binary of the “evil empire” versus the beacon of American democracy was not just a rhetorical device but a framework that informed policy and societal aspirations. America was held up as the paragon of liberal democracy, and often on the crossroads of development, Georgian political elites proposed a straightforward transplant



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of U.S. models, from the introduction of low taxes to the sweeping privatization of health insurance, from the popular election of local sheriffs and to the widespread use of jury trials. If it was American, you could not go fundamentally wrong with it.

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The tables have turned now. By invoking loony ideas such as “deep state conspiracy,” critiquing mainstream media as inherently elitist, and lambasting Europe’s bureaucratic overreach, the Georgian Dream has mirrored recent American political discourse to justify its own authoritarian measures. This is not necessarily a matter of some fundamental “alignment of values” with MAGA as the Georgian Dream officials claim but the disintegration of consensus over the role of the civil service as a politically neutral body in the U.S. attempts to challenge the legitimacy of electoral processes and the questioning of the integrity of the media are all an extremely useful *alibi* for Georgia’s consolidating autocracy to anchor its own legitimacy into the U.S. and to disorient its opponents – those same people who marched under American flags.

The Trump/MAGA era has laid bare deep contradictions within the very democratic institutions that many in Georgia once looked up to. In the United States, growing polarization over the role of government, distrust in electoral processes, and attacks on the media have triggered crises of legitimacy that resonate far beyond its borders. The Georgian Dream has been quick to capitalize on these trends. It has adopted populist, anti-estab-

lishment rhetoric reminiscent of the MAGA playbook, using it to discredit and attack its domestic critics—particularly independent media and civil society organizations that serve as vital checks on power.

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The glaring case in point is the Georgian Dream replicating to the letter the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) to target its opponents. The previous law, rammed through the parliament on the tips of the police truncheons and water cannons, was successfully framed by the opposition as the “Russian law” and discredited. Now, the Georgian Dream parliament has rubber-stamped an even more repressive FARA, counting on the reflexive public acceptance of the U.S. model as always being the “correct” one.

This replication of U.S. political patterns for authoritarian consolidation triggers a profound identity crisis among Georgia’s liberal elites. Having anchored their hopes for democracy in an American model that now confronts its own demons, these elites are also forced to confront the limitations of importing a blueprint.

The painful truth is that often instinctive “pro-Americanism” of the post-Soviet Georgian elite has its dark side. Yes, parts of the Soviet *intelligentsia* admired the U.S. because of its democratic ideals but larger swaths of Soviet citizens latched on to the U.S. because they felt it was an *inverted* Soviet Union.

There are many elements common to the U.S. political imagery: the imperial symbolism of Hollywood’s Roman-themed colossus, the brag and swagger of the Reagan administration, the space-race idea of a “final frontier,” the idealization of the



masculine force in Rambo movies, and the Manichean view of the world which appealed instinctively to Soviet citizens, conditioned by the heroics of social-realism but living in the “swamp” of the Brezhnev era. They felt the U.S. *won the Cold War because it was like us but stronger*. Vladimir Putin’s parable of Russia “getting up from its knees” means, among other things, that Russia can, once again, speak on par with the U.S. and speak the language of power.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose personal foibles profoundly shape the Georgian Dream, is one of these Soviet men. The European reflexiveness, compromise, endless debates and committees, and obsession with form and niceties are too complex or, to quote one of the tech brothers – “lacking in masculine energy.” By contrast, designating the U.S. as a personal enemy is an article of pride, a sign that you made it up in the world, that you are sparring with THE power.

Georgian liberals suddenly discover that some of their fellow pro-American travelers were there for different (wrong?) reasons. Their struggle to emancipate themselves from the instinctive affinity with what the U.S. leadership says or does is emblematic of this broader crisis: Georgia’s republican identity must be defined in a way that resonates with its unique historical, cultural, and social realities. It needs to become more authentic, more “self-standing” in a world where geopolitical alliances are in flux and ideological and geopolitical dividing lines may no longer coincide.

In this context, it symbolizes a reaction against domestic authoritarianism and an acknowledgment of the need to re-examine the foundations upon which modern Georgian liberalism has been built.

## Going Local - An Opportunity

Georgia’s historical and cultural tapestry is rich with democratic traditions that predate its mod-

ern struggles. Centuries of political evolution have left the nation with a legacy that includes Christian conservatism, nationalist conservatism, and the progressive nationalism of the national revival at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This heritage reached a brief flowering during Georgia’s first independent republic (1918–1921) when social democracy played a pivotal role in shaping the national political landscape. These indigenous forms of democratic practice, however, have been largely trampled upon by Soviet oppression, distorted by its propaganda machine, and, more recently, overshadowed by the copycat institutionalization of the democratic façade on the American model.

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The current moment, fraught with internal political strife and external ideological pressures, presents a unique opportunity to revive locally rooted democratic principles.

As the American model is increasingly under scrutiny, so are its vulnerabilities revealed and the foundations of the democratic edifice laid bare. While the U.S. stands exposed in a moment of deep vulnerability, for an external observer and scholar, it offers a rare opportunity to peer into the heart of this great democracy—to see not only what makes it tick, but also what causes it to falter.

There are lessons to learn and the possibility to go beyond the dogma.

Georgian liberal intellectuals can also look inward to Georgia’s own historical experience for inspiration and combine it with the lessons gleaned from the U.S.

The challenge is formidable. Contemporary Georgia is not merely contending with the legacies of

its Soviet past; it is also wrestling with the imported debates over “wokeism” and other cultural issues that have little relevance to its own democratic traditions. Moreover, the pervasive influence of social media has deepened the polarization of political discourse, reducing complex debates to simplistic binaries of us versus them.

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Yet the prize is extracting Georgia from the damaging cyclical spirals of democratic crises. There is a growing sense among intellectuals and civic activists that the time is ripe for a re-engagement with Georgia’s own democratic heritage. By drawing on centuries-old traditions and reinterpreting them in light of modern challenges, Georgian society could develop a model of democracy that is both authentic and resilient.

This locally rooted approach would emphasize the importance of civic participation, institutional accountability, solidarity, and a pluralistic political culture—values that are deeply embedded in Georgia’s historical narrative but have been sidelined by the allure of a supposedly “proven” liberal model. Such a shift would require not only a rethinking of political strategies but also a fundamental transformation in how democracy is conceptualized and practiced in Georgia. Reclaiming this narrative will be neither swift nor straightforward. It will necessitate a prolonged period of political mobilization and intellectual debate, one that goes beyond the present moment’s fleeting protests and partisan skirmishes.

If Georgian society can sustain a broad-based dialogue that transcends the polarization of the cur-

rent era, it might finally create the space needed for a democratic reawakening for the new Republic to be formed. This process of “de-anchoring” from an external model could enable Georgia to develop a more robust, contextually appropriate system of governance that honors its unique legacy while adapting to modern challenges.

## Reinventing the Republic

The unfolding political drama in Georgia encapsulates a broader global crisis: the erosion of democratic principles once taken for granted and the challenges of reconnecting the sclerotic democratic rituals to their original republican meaning.

Georgian liberal elites now face a critical juncture. Their long-held belief in the superiority of the American model and their instinctive mistrust of the continental, more complex pluralistic deliberation are both laid to a test as the U.S. grapples with populism and Europe seeks ways to respond to the Russian threat.

The path forward is undoubtedly challenging. It demands that political leaders, civic activists, and the broader citizenry engage in a sustained and honest dialogue about the nature of democracy, free from the unthinking validation of external models. Only by embracing a pluralistic vision—one that reconciles the lessons of the past with the demands of the present—can Georgia hope to reclaim its agency on the international stage and foster a democratic culture that is both authentic and enduring.

The road ahead is uncertain but the potential for a revitalized, locally grounded democracy remains an inspiring possibility ■