

# Being Around the Table, Rather Than on the Menu

## The European Challenge in the Multipolar World

“**T**he European Union was formed to screw the United States, and they have done a good job of it,” [declared](#) Donald Trump to journalists on 26 February. A month later, the U.S. president [imposed](#) tariffs, including on European countries, and declared a full-blown trade war with the EU. Europe and the United States, through the ages, have experienced many tensions within the alliance.

There have been the *Suez Crisis* in 1956, concerns over Afghanistan and the global financial crisis, and the substantial divergence of views at the time of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 when overbearing America treated Europeans in highly offensive terms.

Since the new Trump administration took office,

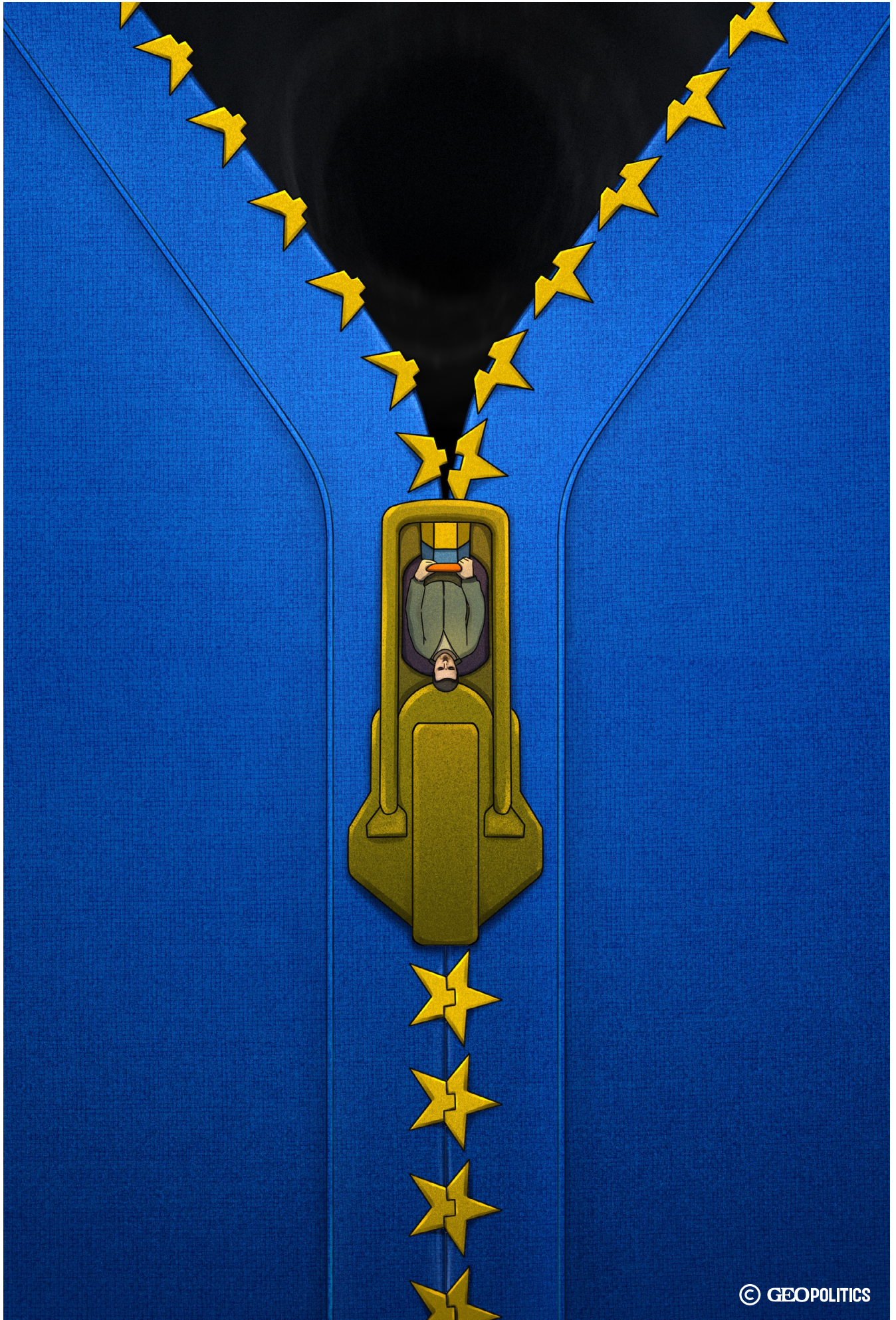
something unprecedented appears to be unfolding. For the first time, it seems that in both strategic calculations and emotional disposition, American leadership no longer sees Europe as an ally—though not necessarily as an outright enemy either. This shift in perception is starkly illustrated by the now-infamous leaked Houthi PC signal chat among senior U.S. officials. In one striking comment, Vice President Vance [wrote](#), “I just hate bailing out Europeans once more,” reflecting the deep disdain with which parts of the American leadership now regard their transatlantic partners.

Some may argue that Trump is harsher with allies like Mexico, Canada, Japan, or South Korea than with Europe. But what’s clearer is that we are witnessing the end of an era—from Roosevelt to Biden—when the U.S. acted as the West’s be-



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nevolent guarantor, rooted in Wilsonian idealism. Announced tariffs, talk of annexing Greenland or absorbing Canada, the abandonment of Ukraine, and threats to leave NATO mark a turning point. Whether it is a calculated gambit or “madman theory,” the damage is done. Even the most cautious allies now grasp that the U.S. may no longer be a dependable partner—and could even become a rival, a once unthinkable possibility.

## From a Generous Empire to Demanding One

Trump’s fiery rhetoric about Europe is more than emotional bluster—it reflects a deep-seated belief that Europe is not a true ally but a freeloader living off American power. This view isn’t new; it dates back to the 1970s and 1980s, when Trump, as a businessman, saw countries like Germany and Japan as threats to the U.S. economy. Unlike his first term, he is now surrounded by ideologically driven advisers with a strategic agenda—and a determination not to squander the second chance they believe they’ve been given. A sense of urgency, driven by the ticking clock to the 2026 midterms, is pushing them to act quickly and forcefully. At the heart of Trump’s foreign policy is the trade deficit, and in his eyes, Europe is the worst offender—reaping the greatest gains economically and in terms of security at America’s expense.

There is a real basis for this thinking: at the end of the Second World War, the Europeans asked the United States to stay on the European continent to help rebuild it and protect it from the new threat - communism. We must not forget Truman’s decisive role in the U.S. commitment to NATO, while the Senate was much more circumspect. Europe benefited from American military involvement and the Marshall Plan, behaving like a free rider, especially West Germany, which saved a lot on its security and developed an export-oriented economy. But for the sake of honesty, it should be recalled

that it was a codependency characterized, like in all codependency relations, by both mutual benefits and rebukes. Each time European protégés tried to break it (several unsuccessful attempts to launch “European Defense” initiatives), they were discreetly but firmly discouraged by Washington.

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The American Empire was once generous, willing to overlook strict profit calculations in exchange for the responsibilities of global leadership—a pattern seen in all great empires since Alexander. Such generosity tends to accompany dominance and unchallenged strength. But today, Trump’s ledger-like approach to foreign policy signals leaner times for the Empire. U.S. supremacy is no longer assured, and for the first time since the Cold War, a credible rival—China—is abandoning Deng Xiaoping’s cautious strategy and openly pursuing global leadership. The American Empire, now in a state of uncertainty, is turning to its allies and dependents with demands for accountability. But this shift is not a display of strength—it is a symptom of decline.

The rupture with Europe—or at least the transformation of the transatlantic alliance into a purely transactional relationship—has deep structural roots and is likely to endure. Trumpism, at its core, is a reaction to globalization, which many in the American working and lower-middle classes perceive as having eroded their economic security. On a cultural level, it is also a backlash against what is seen as the “excesses” of progressivism, often labeled as “wokeism” or “socialism.” Fairly or not, both globalization and progressive norms are partly attributed to European influence and its sprawling bureaucracy.

Adding momentum to this hardline stance is the growing influence of digital platforms and the tech “broligarchs”—a powerful bloc of Trump’s supporters who, despite their ideological differences, have formed a tactical alliance with Judeo-Christian conservatives. These tech elites view the EU’s expansive and restrictive regulatory framework as a barrier to their growth and profits. Their opposition to Brussels is not merely rooted in libertarian ideals about “absolute free speech” but also in tangible economic interests. This alignment of cultural, political, and financial motives is reinforcing a harsher, more confrontational U.S. policy toward Europe.

## European Pole in a Multipolar World?

In the last five years, Europe has undergone two tectonic shocks. The first was the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This shock reawakened NATO and instilled geopolitics into the EU’s actions, notably by reformulating its energy policy and reviving the enlargement issue. Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine also finally convinced a vast majority of Europeans, after decades of denial, that Russia was the main threat to their security and Europe’s top enemy. The second shock, equally, if not even more significant, was Trump’s entry into the White House in January 2025 and the measures he has been adopting during the last two months.

In the immediate aftermath of the initial shock, there was hope for a united democratic front and strengthened transatlantic ties in response to Russian imperialism. Yet, less than three years later, the very core of the Western world—the axis around which the liberal, rules-based order revolved—has fractured dramatically. Washington, once the anchor of Western unity, is now actively unraveling it, leaving its European partners unprepared—both politically and intellectually—to face this new reality.

The current crisis surpasses that of 2022, as it touches every facet of life—economy, security, global alliances, and the very structure of the international fiscal and monetary system. The pressing question is whether Europe can rise to form a pole of its own or whether it risks becoming a passive continent, akin to Africa or Asia in the 19th century. The United States, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, China doubt Europe’s ability to achieve this and actively challenge the idea. Often, this skepticism is rhetorical and performative—statements made not just to express belief but to shape reality by undermining confidence and willing failure into existence. Putin and his circle have long portrayed Europe as subordinate to Washington. “*They stand at their master’s feet and gently wag their tails,*” Putin [said](#) recently, while his foreign policy advisor Yuri Ushakov went further, [calling](#) European leaders “affectionate puppies.”

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While Washington has not (yet) gone so far publicly in its verbal excesses, the current administration does not recognize Europe as one of the poles in the multipolar world. China, Russia, and maybe India could be the poles, but not Europe. Trump’s contempt for the Transatlantic friends was evident when the U.S. launched negotiations with Moscow on Ukraine without Ukraine and Europe while the security of the whole continent was at stake. The same applies to the disdain shown by the U.S. administration for the Old Continent while openly [claiming](#) the territory of Greenland under Danish jurisdiction according to international law.

Washington cannot ignore that Russia’s GDP equates to the GDP of Spain and Portugal com-

bined and that the country's population is inferior to those of Germany and Italy, but the reason why Trump despises Europe and respects Russia is found in the belief that Europe is too weak, too divided, too dependent and needs to go through complex decision-making processes. At the same time, Russia is ruled by a strongman who is not embarrassed by constraints such as the rule of law, public opinion, human rights, or democracy.

Hubert Vedrine, France's former Minister of Foreign Affairs and once President Mitterrand's foreign policy aid, who is also a self-qualified realist and long-time critic of Europe's "supra-nationalism" and its naive "human rights-based foreign policy," [describe](#) Europeans as "Care Bears lost in the world of Jurassic Park." The diagnosis was harsh but not entirely devoid of common sense. Now that the rule-based order is being shattered and brutal strength is becoming a determining factor in international relations, complacent and fragmented Europe is awakening in a nightmare.

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The repeated summits, the announcement of historic rearmament decisions ("[Rearm Europe](#)," the German "[fiscal bazooka](#)," etc.), and the commitment to send "reassurance forces" to Ukraine to prevent a new Russian invasion once a comprehensive ceasefire enters into force, are all strong measures waiting to take shape. Europeans, seeing the NATO carpet being pulled out from under them and, at the same time, being subjected to a trade

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## Challenges and Capabilities

The first challenge is unity—always difficult to achieve, even as fear and external threats are pushing Europe together in unprecedented ways. The problem lies in the fact that the two most powerful instruments of European unity, the EU and NATO, are marked by the presence of hostile members—currently two: Viktor Orbán's Hungary and Robert Fico's Slovakia. In matters of foreign and security policy, where unanimity is required, the only viable paths are either seeking alternative formats or changing the rules through deeper integration. Neither is off the table, but both present serious obstacles.

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A more realistic option is the formation of coalitions of the willing—bringing together states that are ready and able to defend themselves. Operating outside the EU framework makes these coalitions more flexible and opens the door to key non-member states like the United Kingdom, Norway, and Türkiye. Ukraine, though still outside both NATO and the EU, is expected to play a leading role in the continent's defense.

The question of unity also touches on a particularly sensitive issue: leadership. While the Franco-Brit-

ish tandem seems functional for now, Germany has ambitions of its own—not to mention Italy, whose current government, until recently, boasted of having the closest ties with Trump and Elon Musk. Despite a broad consensus among European governments on the need for closer cooperation and building European defense, sharp differences remain over how to handle relations with the United States. Rome favors caution and conciliation, while Paris and Berlin appear more willing to “turn the page” and explore autonomy.

In the trade arena, the EU is far better equipped to defend itself. Here, the European Commission has a leading role and unanimity is not required—only a qualified majority of member states is needed. The EU is a formidable trading power with robust tools for retaliation. Over decades, it has built a strong and well-defended trade policy, something we in Georgia [experienced](#) directly during the DCFTA negotiations. DG Trade felt more like an impregnable fortress than, for instance, the EEAS. This is hardly surprising, as the EU was primarily a single market long before it aspired to geopolitical weight.

Since 2023, the EU has also [implemented](#) anti-coercion instruments that allow it, within a short period, to restrict access to the European market—not only targeting entire countries but also specific companies and individuals. These tools can include blocking access to public procurement, suspending IP rights, or freezing entry to European capital markets.

But the unity and strength of the European pole are also challenged from within. Eurosceptic parties—on both the far right and radical left—command significant portions of the electorate. In France, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s LFI, and smaller sovereigntist groups together make up more than 40% of the vote. In Germany, the far-right AfD and far-left parties together hold over a third. The trend is similar, if not

worse, in countries like Austria, the Netherlands, and Romania.

These forces have long had external ties to powers hostile to the EU, especially Russia. Now, the situation is deteriorating further with open support from Trump’s administration. JD Vance, after delivering a scathing speech in Munich, [met](#) ostentatiously with AfD leader Alice Weidel while snubbing Chancellor Olaf Scholz and CDU leader Friedrich Merz. Elon Musk, whose influence in the White House is no secret, has publicly [endorsed](#) the AfD and [criticized](#) the French legal system over Marine Le Pen’s trial.

It is unlikely to end there. We can expect that in addition to Russia, the United States will increasingly interfere in European political life through social media platforms and in support of extremist parties whose goal is the fragmentation or destruction of the EU. When U.S. officials talk about reviving Nord Stream with Moscow, it suggests they are preparing for the AfD to take power in Germany—the only party that supports such a move. While some pro-Trump voices argue that this is meant to “wake up” Europe, it is clear that if Europe is waking up, it is doing so despite Trump, not because of him.

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A fragmented Europe—made up of small and medium states—will be far easier to manipulate and far less capable of resisting, whether economically or militarily. The early signs from the Trump administration indicate that it sees Europe not as a partner but, at best, as a buffer zone around Russia. This is the new reality Europe must learn to live with.

That said, there is a possible upside. American pressure could push centrist and pro-European forces into action. The results of the German elections may be interpreted in that light. In France, the vocal support of Musk, Vance, and Steve Bannon is splitting the far right, which has historically fed off anti-Americanism.

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Let's not forget that before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many European states—especially in the South—saw their main challenge as coming from the South: uncontrolled migration and the rise of Islamic radicalism within Europe. These threats have not disappeared, but they have been overshadowed by the existential dangers posed by Russia and the potential collapse of the U.S. security guarantee. Under these new conditions, countries on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean—Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Türkiye, and Syria—are gaining new leverage. Europe must build smart partnerships with them or risk having them maintain migratory pressure as a geopolitical tool.

None of this justifies hesitation. Europe must act—and act decisively. The seriousness of the moment leaves no room for delay. The idea of Joint European Forces (JEF) must take concrete form—and quickly—even if outside NATO and EU structures. It is telling that in over 65 years of the EU's existence, the only force wearing a European uniform is FRONTEX, created in 2004. That's not enough. The EU wasn't designed for military integration, but it can contribute financially to building a Euro-

pean defense capability, foster convergence among defense industries, and support the creation of an integrated defense sector. These efforts must extend to Ukraine, the UK, Türkiye, Switzerland, and Norway—countries that must, ideally, become full members of the future European pole, or at the very least, close and reliable partners.

Europe is already a powerhouse in trade and finance. As noted above, it has the tools to confront tariff wars. The uncertainty sown by the U.S. in markets and supply chains, though damaging, may also offer Europe an opportunity. If handled wisely, Europe's stability—including its legal predictability—could make it a global pole of attraction, particularly as Trump undermines the foundations of the U.S. judicial system.

But Europe must urgently strengthen its [competitiveness](#). In the last 25 years, it has fallen behind the U.S. by nearly 26%. Bureaucracy and lagging innovation are key factors. There is real potential for growth by deepening the single market and investing in the defense industry. The [Draghi Report](#) has already laid out much of what is needed: a Capital Markets Union, investment in innovation and research, reducing digital dependency. Europe must cultivate what made the U.S. strong—competitiveness, scientific innovation, and the rule of law. There is no miracle solution.

Achieving these goals will require greater European integration. But this is difficult while EU institutions suffer from a deep crisis of legitimacy. Populist forces exploit the EU's faceless bureaucracy and lack of identity. For Europe to become a true global pole, it must undergo not just institutional change but a philosophical transformation. This is possible. Europe has the history, culture, and intellectual depth to imagine itself anew. What's needed now is the political will—and urgency—to do so.

## Quo Vadis Georgia?

Historically, multipolar systems have been volatile and marked by shifting alliances and frequent conflicts. These conflicts emerged not only directly between the leaders of the poles but also on their periphery. Georgia is a small country and for Tbilisi, the membership of a bigger interstate alliance is necessary for survival.

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What opportunities lie ahead? In today's emerging multipolar world, one of the most dangerous poles is the one dominated by Russia—the so-called Russkii Mir. And it has its eyes on Georgia. We already have a clear sense of what alignment with this bloc entails, thanks to the cautionary examples of Belarus, several Central Asian states, and Armenia—all of which are now trying to break free after having been sacrificed, stripped of their sovereignty, and robbed of the geopolitical gains they achieved in the 1990s.

The countries orbiting Moscow are experiencing a new form of limited sovereignty—a modern-day Brezhnev Doctrine 2.0. This version is, in many ways, even more repressive. It is cloaked in the ideology of Russian imperialism and nationalism; it operates economically as a mafia-style system run by corrupt oligarchs loyal to Putin; and it sustains itself politically through authoritarian regimes that crush fundamental freedoms. On the international stage, this bloc defines itself through hostility toward the West—what remains of it—and a permanent readiness for conflict.

The Georgian Dream government's policy is moving in this direction.

The alternative to this outlook depends on the success of the European project in building a pole of attraction of its own. If, at the strategic and defense level, Europe transforms from a “teddy bear” into a “porcupine”, and becomes more efficient and competitive at the economic level, it could emerge as a compelling force. Politically, it remains one of the very few—if not the only—zones that safeguards individual and public freedoms, guaranteed by the rule of law and an independent judiciary. Culturally, it ensures the preservation of diversity. For Tbilisi, this could be an ideal option.

The *sine qua non* condition for Georgia's rapprochement with this bloc is the rise to power of democratic and pro-European forces—something that, at least in principle, aligns with the will of the Georgian people. But does a transforming Europe view Georgia as a potential member of its renewed alliance? With the current government in power, the answer leans toward the negative. Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia appears to be less favored for integration. What Georgia needs to do in order to associate itself with this pole—and what Europe strategically needs in the Caucasus-Black Sea region—are questions that must be urgently addressed in both Tbilisi and European capitals.

An alternative path lies in Georgia's potential involvement in the axis being shaped by Türkiye in tandem with Azerbaijan. While this is not a pole in itself, it is an axis built on shared geopolitical and economic interests—particularly in energy transit, trade, and major infrastructure projects—that is establishing itself as an indispensable partner to Europe. If a durable and mutually acceptable [peace deal](#) is reached between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Yerevan could also become a future participant in this axis.

The Georgian Dream government must reckon with the strengthening of this South Caucasus axis. However, its ability to act is constrained by Russia, which would not look kindly on Tbilisi's



deep integration into it. Let us recall that in the 1990s, Moscow did everything it could to obstruct major energy initiatives such as the BTC pipeline—including organizing [coup](#) attempts, terrorist attacks against heads of state, and the sabotage of infrastructure. In 2025, Russia remains a competitor of Türkiye in the region, even if the war in Ukraine compels Moscow to adopt a more conciliatory and flexible posture toward Ankara.

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Much will depend on the future of Georgia's relations with Europe, which in turn will shape the nature of the Turkish-dominated axis in the region. This equation includes multiple unknowns, the resolution of which will depend on internal political developments in Türkiye, the trajectory of Turkish-American relations, the evolving situation in the Middle East, and more ■