

The Brain Drain That Will Break Georgia's Democracy

In April 2024, during the election campaign, Georgia's shadow ruler, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, dropped the mask. Speaking to Georgian Dream supporters, he openly [declared](#) war on the opposition and civil society. He grouped together all critics—be they NGOs, political parties, or private individuals—under one label: the “Collective United National Movement,” branding them enemies of the state. With striking contempt, he called civil society “pseudo-elites nurtured by foreign countries” who, in his words, “have no homeland” and “are ashamed of their people.”

Soon after the Georgian Dream claimed victory in the contested 26 October elections—results questioned by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe—Ivanishvili's words were turned into law. The ruling party launched a broad assault on all remaining pockets of dissent. They crushed street protests through steep fines and jail time, froze the accounts of the ad hoc funds, which financed the activists, copied the U.S. for-

eign agents' law without adapting it to Georgia's context, and passed legislation that silences the critical media. The Georgian Dream also re-introduced treason charges to target the opposition and began rewriting history through a parliamentary commission investigating the United National Movement's (UNM)'s time in power (2003–2012) – an effort that will inevitably lead to the outlawing of opposition parties.

All of these actions, if not reversed promptly, will not just suppress the dissent but will likely lead to a massive brain drain from Georgia to the EU. This will, in turn, be a final nail in the coffin of Georgian democracy.

An Anaconda Strategy to Suffocate Dissent

The Georgian Dream has acted like an anaconda, slowly and relentlessly tightening its grip on the democratic resistance until the target is too weak to



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resist. The crackdown has been methodical—using the façade of democratic procedure to legitimize repressive laws. Unsurprisingly, Ivanishvili was allegedly called anaconda when doing business in Russia in the 1990s.

To deter escalating protests since late 2024, the Georgian Dream changed the administrative code, imposing GEL 5,000 (approximately EUR 1,700) fines or 60-day jail terms for blocking roads. For a country where the average monthly salary is less than half that, and youth unemployment among 20–24-year-olds [stands](#) at 32%, this is a crushing blow. Facial recognition technology is now used – illegally – to track protestors, and the community funds that covered the fines of the protestors have been foreclosed, deepening the chilling effect.

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Instead of implementing the Russian-style “foreign agent” law passed in 2024, which was full of legal loopholes that civil society actors were prepared to exploit, the Georgian Dream adopted a copy of the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) – in its 1938 form, without the subsequent legal interpretations and precedents. For instance, in the U.S., FARA does not apply to think tanks, media, and

NGOs, while in the Georgian case, according to the explanatory note prepared by the Georgian Dream, FARA is necessary to regulate civil society's funding from abroad. In Georgia's context, where nearly all civil society organizations depend on foreign funding, it effectively criminalizes the sector. NGOs that do not register as "foreign agents"—a term tainted by Soviet-era stigma—face steep fines and up to five years in prison. This would render the previously "vibrant" civil society "non-existent." But the Georgian Dream seems to be ready to swiftly replace civil society organizations with loyal ones, just like it recreated "loyal opposition" in the Parliament after all real opposition parties boycotted the legislative body. Specifically, a state agency has been created to issue grants to pro-government NGOs, with GEL 20 million (approximately EUR 7 million) earmarked for the effort in 2025 in order to nurture loyal NGOs and GONGOs.

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Then comes the media. Allegedly borrowing from the UK Broadcasting Code, the Georgian Dream introduced new rules banning foreign funding for audiovisual media and gave sweeping content control powers to Georgia's National Communications Commission (GNCC) —an institution long criticized for being under the ruling party's thumb. Much of Georgia's independent media faces extinction without foreign funding and editorial independence. One of the [nine requirements](#) the EU had with Georgia was to ensure institutional independence and impartiality of the Communication Commission, something which Georgia failed to deliver.

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And finally, the fatal blow is being prepared for the political opposition. The Georgian Dream passed new amendments to the Criminal Code, reintroducing the charges of treason aimed squarely at the United National Movement. It blames them for the 2008 war and subsequent loss of territory and now seeks legal retribution under the guise of historical justice. A special parliamentary commission was launched to investigate "crimes" allegedly committed by the UNM between 2003 and 2012. On 7 August 2024, the Georgian Dream issued a [statement](#) stressing that "the treasonous crime of the National Movement had the worst consequences. As a result of the 2008 war, we lost two historic regions, hundreds of soldiers and civilians were killed, and 30,000 people were displaced. It is unacceptable for a crime of this magnitude to go unpunished without a legal assessment." This legal assessment, as already publicly stated by the ruling party, will lead to the banning of the "collective UNM," that is, all opposition parties. The relevant legislative amendment has already been [tabled](#) in the Parliament.

Following Targets: Education and the Internet

As in other consolidating autocracies, education is emerging as one of the next battlegrounds for control. Having already neutralized independent institutions like the judiciary and media, the Georgian

Dream is now poised to tighten its grip on universities—some of the last remaining spaces for critical thinking and dissent.

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Universities have historically been hubs of resistance, dialogue, and civic mobilization in Georgia, especially among the youth. The Georgian Dream sees this autonomy as a threat. The government is expected to deploy a mix of bureaucratic and legal tools to bring higher education under tighter control. Stricter accreditation procedures, new regulatory hurdles, and politically motivated inspections are all likely to be used to exert pressure on universities perceived as unfriendly. The goal is twofold: silence critical academic voices and reshape the intellectual landscape into one that reinforces the ruling party's ideology. In January, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze already [announced](#) that the education system would be dramatically transformed – not hiding the will to subjugate it to political control.

Another target is Georgia's increasingly internationalized university system, which is a main source of independence for many critically minded academic institutions. Foreign students now [comprise](#) 17.3% of the student population, with 31,000 international students contributing approximately GEL 800 million (EUR 266 million) to the national economy in 2024. Many of these students come from India, Iraq, Nigeria, and other developing countries, attracted by affordable English-language medical and technical degrees.

This growing sector—an economic and reputational asset—is now vulnerable. The government may restrict student visa issuance, tighten immigration rules, or limit university autonomy in admitting international students under the pretext of national security, immigration, or administrative reforms. These actions will not only undercut revenue streams for Georgian, especially private, universities but also sever international academic linkages, further isolating the country from global education and research networks. The effects of the new FARA on academia are yet unknown, as many academic institutions dread the possibility of losing access to European research grants, programs like Horizon, or funding opportunities for academics. The experience of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus shows that once restrictive legislations are enacted, academia suffers as well, even if, on paper, exceptions for academic activities are envisaged in the laws.

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At the same time, there are clear signs that internet freedom is next on the chopping block. While the Georgian Dream has so far stopped short of passing formal internet censorship laws, ruling party fig-

ures have repeatedly floated the idea of regulating online platforms. The aim is to dismantle the last bastion of unfettered public discourse—the digital sphere.

This could take the form of “cybersecurity” legislation modeled on laws seen in Russia or Türkiye, allowing the government to block websites, demand data from platforms, or punish vague offenses like spreading “false information.” Independent media outlets, civil society groups, and even private citizens using social media to mobilize protest or challenge power could find themselves under increasing digital surveillance and legal threat. If implemented, such measures would mark a chilling turn toward comprehensive state control over public expression, both offline and online.

The Inevitable Brain Drain

Amid this rapidly closing civic space, Georgia is on the verge of a massive and targeted brain drain—one with serious long-term consequences for its democratic future.

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For civil society leaders, investigative journalists, outspoken academics, and public intellectuals, the options are bleak: register as “foreign agents” and legitimize the government’s narrative; continue working and risk prosecution; shut down operations altogether; or leave the country. With USAID,

NED, RFE/RL, and the VOA suspending operations, many are already packing their bags—taking their experience, networks, and institutional memory with them.

Georgia has known emigration before, especially in the 1990s. But this exodus will be qualitatively different. It will not be driven by economic hardship alone but by political suffocation. It affects a distinct social stratum: the urban, educated, pro-European middle class—those who have been the engine behind Georgia’s democratic reforms, civic innovation, and EU integration efforts. Their removal will leave a gaping void in the country’s intellectual and civic life.

In 2023 alone, 205,000 people [left](#) Georgia. According to a CRRRC survey, 45% of Georgians [said](#) they would consider leaving the country temporarily. With political repression rising in 2025, that number is likely to grow significantly. But this will not be a repeat of the Central and Eastern European migration post-EU accession where emigrants eventually returned, bringing back know-how and investment. Under the Georgian Dream’s current trajectory, exiled dissidents will not be welcomed back. Instead, they will become part of a disenfranchised diaspora, disconnected from the policymaking processes at home. As Ivanishvili once famously said, the Georgians are welcome to leave the country and live and work in the EU.

The consequences will ripple far beyond civil society. Many of those leaving are university lecturers, trainers, and public educators, meaning Georgia’s educational system will be further hollowed out. Others lead human rights organizations, run fact-checking initiatives, or provide legal aid to the most vulnerable. Their departure will dismantle the only remaining counterweight to the Georgian Dream’s expanding dominance.

Europe Must Prepare—And Respond

As Georgia's democratic space collapses, Europe must step in—not just with words, but with a concrete plan to support the country's civic infrastructure both inside and outside its borders.

The reality is clear: more Georgians will seek asylum in the EU. Currently, 20 EU and Schengen countries classify Georgia as a “safe country of origin,” which [allows](#) for fast-track rejection of asylum claims. But this classification is increasingly outdated. Countries like Belgium, Malta, Hungary, and Slovakia already do not apply this status to Georgia, and recent rulings in Germany—where a Berlin court [refused](#) to treat Georgia as a safe country—signal that change is coming.

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EU member states should be ready to revise their safe-country lists and process Georgian asylum applications with political nuance and urgency. Beyond asylum, they should create tailored humanitarian visa pathways, residency permits, and professional support schemes for civil society actors, journalists, and academics fleeing repression. The lessons from Belarus and Ukraine could come in handy.

But more importantly, Europe must invest in Georgia's democratic diaspora. These are the people who will be instrumental in rebuilding Georgia's institutions when political conditions shift. Such support must include:

- Legal and logistical assistance to establish NGOs in exile;
- Institutional development funding for civic groups forced to relocate;

- Fellowships and grants for journalists, researchers, and policy experts working on Georgia-related issues;
- Support for independent online media hubs and information platforms;
- Continued engagement with civil society organizations still operating in Georgia—especially those refusing to register as “foreign agents.”

The Georgian Dream is not merely undermining democracy—it is attempting to dismantle the very idea that citizens can organize independently, speak freely, or hold power accountable. The consequences of this are not confined to Georgia's borders. A captured, autocratic Georgia would destabilize the wider Black Sea region, embolden authoritarianism, and deal a blow to the EU's credibility in its neighborhood.

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The brain drain that is coming—and in many ways already underway—is not just a crisis of migration. It is a deliberate ejection of Georgia's democratic soul, engineered through legal pressure, financial starvation, and fear. If the West fails to respond, it will not only betray its Georgian partners—it will cede the field to those who believe that repression works and that democracy can be erased without consequence.

Europe must act—not only to shelter Georgia's exiles but to amplify their voices, support their work, and keep the promise of democratic renewal alive. Because once the conscience of a nation is forced into silence or exile, rebuilding it will be a far steeper and lonelier climb ■