

# Crisis in Georgia – The EU Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Following the 15 July 2025 Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) meeting, held just before the EU's summer recess, the European Union once again [warned](#) the Georgian Dream government that visa-free travel—granted to Georgian citizens since 2017—may be suspended. This warning reflects the EU's view that visa liberalization remains one of the few remaining levers to steer Georgia back onto the European path. A day earlier, on 14 July, the European Commission [sent](#) a letter to the Georgian authorities reiterating the eight deliverables listed in its seventh visa suspension [report](#) from December 2024. The letter also set a firm deadline: by 31 August 2025, the Georgian Dream must report progress in implementing the recommendations—or at least explain what concrete steps it is taking.

This move signals that the EU has not yet given up on Georgia. But it also reveals a troubling reality: eight months after the Georgian Dream's Prime Minister

Irakli Kobakhidze announced a suspension of the EU accession process, Brussels still lacks a coherent and forceful response. The threat to revoke visa-free travel is a high-stakes gamble, carrying reputational risks for both sides. The Georgian Dream must demonstrate to its base that it remains resolute in the face of Western pressure. Meanwhile, the EU must demonstrate that it is not merely a rhetorical power but one capable of real action—one that still stands with the Georgian people and can deter the regime's authoritarian drift.

***The EU must demonstrate that it is not merely a rhetorical power but one capable of real action—one that still stands with the Georgian people and can deter the regime's authoritarian drift.***

So far, the Georgian Dream's reaction has been defiant. Rather than engaging with the EU's requests,



**VANO CHKHIKVADZE**  
Contributor

Vano Chkhikvadze is based in Brussels, Belgium and heads the EU Policy of Araminta, a human rights organization operating in Germany. He used to work as the EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia for 13 years. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.



© GEOPOLITICS

*This illustration continues the visual narrative from our past [article](#), drawn in the style peculiar to Georgian painter Niko Pirosmiani.*

it has [intensified](#) its disinformation campaign, portraying Brussels as forcing Georgia to choose between sovereignty, national identity, and visa-free access to Europe. There is no indication that the Georgian Dream regime plans to meet the EU's conditions. This puts the EU in a difficult bind. By September, it will have to choose: trigger the visa suspension mechanism, await the Commission's eighth report and its possible recommendation to revoke the visa-free status, or continue its pattern of strong words and weak responses. Crucially, the EU must also find a way to target its measures, punishing those in power without alienating the pro-European Georgian public.

## The Way Ahead

With the 31 August deadline fast approaching, it is highly unlikely that the Georgian Dream will meet

the European Union's demands. As of now, the ruling party has shown no political will to address the concerns raised in the Commission's letter. Instead, it has doubled down on disinformation, portraying the EU's conditions as a threat to Georgia's sovereignty, dignity, and identity. The Georgian Dream continues to [spin](#) a narrative that the EU is punishing Georgia for refusing to open a second front against Russia while simultaneously preparing for the political fallout that may follow a potential suspension of visa-free travel. The party appears confident that such a move would not provoke widespread public outrage since the benefits of visa liberalization are limited to a narrow segment of society.

Indeed, [survey data](#) support this view. According to the CRRC's 2023 Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward the European Union in Georgia, only 17% of the population reported having benefited from vi-

sa-free travel—up from 11% in 2021 and 9% in 2019. The majority of these beneficiaries are young people, often based in Tbilisi. [Travel statistics](#) to the EU and the Schengen zone also reveal moderate usage: 304,800 trips in 2019, 186,500 in 2022 (post-COVID), 333,900 in 2023, 378,500 in 2024, and 88,600 in the first quarter of 2025.

As a fallback, the Georgian Dream may attempt to pick the “low-hanging fruit” among the EU’s demands—such as launching public awareness campaigns on the visa-free regime or drafting a nominal anti-corruption strategy. It might also consider tweaking or repealing the so-called “transparency of foreign influence” law, especially given that a much harsher Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) took effect in summer 2025, threatening civil society and independent media more dramatically than the 2024 “Russian law.” However, there is no indication that the Georgian Dream will take meaningful action on the more substantial issues—such as reversing discriminatory legislation, safeguarding fundamental rights, or upholding protections for LGBTIQ persons. The Georgian Dream will certainly not repeal the legislative package on ‘family values and protection of minors’ and amend the national strategy and action plan on human rights to ensure that the rights of LGBTIQ persons are fully upheld. On the contrary, the party is using those very EU demands to fuel its propaganda machine, claiming that the EU seeks to impose “foreign values” and punish ordinary Georgians.

Ironically, this framing is partially reinforced by some opposition voices and civil society actors, who—while critical of the Georgian Dream—have also [warned](#) against suspending visa liberalization, arguing that the Georgian people should not suffer for the government’s misdeeds. This further complicates the EU’s position.

From Brussels’ perspective, expectations should be low that the Georgian Dream will suddenly reverse

course. Should it offer cosmetic compliance by addressing only superficial issues, the EU might be tempted to extend the timeline yet again. But if the party continues its current path of obstruction and anti-EU rhetoric, Brussels will face a tough decision after 1 September. The credibility of the EU’s leverage—and its broader commitment to democratic conditionality—will be on the line.

At that point, the EU is likely to await the European Commission’s eighth visa suspension report, expected in autumn 2025. If the report recommends triggering the suspension mechanism, the decision will fall to the Council and member states. Under current EU rules, there are [four grounds](#) for suspension:

- A substantial increase (over 50%) in the number of nationals refused entry or found staying illegally in the EU;
- A spike in asylum applications with low recognition rates (around 3-4%);
- A decline in cooperation on the readmission of returnees;
- A significant threat to public policy or internal security, particularly through increased serious crime involving nationals of a third country.

While the EU is still reluctant to penalize the population, it now faces the challenge of calibrating a response that targets those responsible for Georgia’s authoritarian drift without alienating its pro-European citizens. Whether or not it succeeds in striking that balance remains to be seen.

## New Grounds – The EU’s More Effective Tool

In June 2025, the European Union—through an agreement between the Council and the European Parliament—[adopted](#) a significant update to the



rules governing visa-free travel. Four new grounds for triggering the suspension mechanism will be added to the existing ones, broadening the EU's ability to respond to emerging challenges. These include: (1) a lack of alignment between a third country's visa policy and that of the EU, especially if this creates irregular flows from other third countries due to geographic proximity; (2) the operation of investor citizenship schemes which grant passports to individuals with no real ties to the country in exchange for financial contributions; (3) hybrid threats and weaknesses in document security laws and procedures and (4) a deterioration in relations with the EU, particularly concerning human rights, fundamental freedoms, or serious violations of the UN Charter.

***The updated regulation empowers the EU to hold partner countries accountable not only for technical compliance but also for broader political behavior and alignment with European values.***

The core purpose of these changes is twofold: to address growing concerns among EU member states over irregular migration and to strengthen the use of visa liberalization as a political instrument. The updated regulation empowers the EU to hold partner countries accountable not only for technical compliance but also for broader political behavior and alignment with European values. This makes the visa-free regime a more [strategic tool](#) in the EU's foreign policy toolkit, allowing Brussels to respond to authoritarian backsliding, democratic erosion, and geopolitical friction—such as hybrid interference or human rights violations—even in the absence of traditional migration-related triggers.

Alongside these new criteria, the EU has also adjusted the thresholds that determine what constitutes a “substantial increase” in problematic indicators. Under the revised rules, a 30% rise in cases of refused entry, overstays, asylum applications, or

serious criminal offences will suffice, down from the previous 50%. Similarly, the threshold for a “low” asylum recognition rate has been raised from 3-4% to 20%, giving the EU more latitude to act in situations where concerns may not meet the older, stricter benchmarks. These reforms mark a turning point: visa liberalization is no longer just a symbol of trust—it is a conditional privilege, subject to ongoing alignment with the EU's legal, political, and security standards.

## Between a Rock and a Hard Place

When it comes to the ongoing crisis in Georgia, the European Union finds itself between a rock and a hard place. As HRVP Kaja Kallas [stated](#), the EU “does not want to hurt Georgian people and take away the visa-free regime... but at the same time, it's also an issue of credibility of the European Union.” Given the nature of EU policymaking and the requirement of unanimity to impose targeted sanctions, the EU's toolbox remains limited. Unlike sanctions, suspending visa-free travel can be done by a qualified majority vote (15 member states representing 65% of the EU population).

Yet, most EU member states [remain](#) reluctant to suspend Georgia's visa-free regime fully. As it weighs this option, the EU must act cautiously and approach the issue from multiple dimensions. *First*, given the wave of disinformation pushed by the Georgian Dream, the EU will need a clear and direct communication strategy to reach out to Georgian citizens and explain the rationale behind its decision. *Second*, the EU must shift from a reactive posture to a proactive one—setting its own agenda rather than responding to the Georgian Dream's narrative. *Third*, it must consider the fate of human rights defenders and protesters who may be forced to flee the country; revoking visa-free travel would only compound their vulnerability and strengthen the ruling party's repressive toolkit. *Fourth*, in the event of full suspension, the growing anti-immigration mood in many EU member states could make

it nearly impossible for any future pro-European Georgian government to restore the visa waiver. Fifth, the EU faces a strategic dilemma: suspending visa-free travel for a country that holds candidate status could set a damaging precedent. Sixth, the EU is racing against time—the pro-European majority in Georgia expects the EU not only to stand by Georgia but to act swiftly and decisively.

***The EU could consider a more calibrated approach: restricting visa-free travel for specific categories of Georgian citizens.***

To navigate this delicate terrain, the EU could consider a more calibrated approach: restricting visa-free travel for specific categories of Georgian citizens. Article 8 of [EU Regulation 2018/1806](#) allows the European Commission to propose suspending visa-free travel for “certain categories of nationals of the third country concerned, by reference to the relevant types of travel documents and, where appropriate, to additional criteria.” When defining these categories, the regulation urges that they be “broad enough to efficiently contribute to remedying the circumstances.” This option, combined with [upcoming revisions](#) to the visa suspension rules, would enable the EU to limit visa-free access for those directly responsible for undermining fundamental rights and harming EU-Georgia relations—potentially including decision-makers and their family members. Such an approach would preserve the pro-European aspirations of the broader Georgian population while targeting those derailing the country from its European trajectory.

At the same time, the EU must act with caution and precision when identifying which categories will be affected. Messaging will also be critical: the EU should clearly communicate that the suspension process involves multiple institutions and is inherently lengthy. Georgians must understand that while the EU is acting, results should not be expect-

ed overnight. This careful balancing act—between credibility, justice, and solidarity—will shape not only the EU’s stance on Georgia but its broader ability to enforce conditionality in its neighborhood.

## Message Matters

No matter what the decision by the EU regarding the suspension of the visa liberalization, it is essential that the public outreach is robust and the message is smart and to the point.

***Brussels should make clear that visa liberalization was earned by the Georgian people—not their government—and that its suspension is a direct consequence of the Georgian Dream’s deliberate dismantling of democratic institutions and suppression of fundamental rights.***

The European Union must not allow the Georgian Dream’s false dilemmas and anti-Western narratives to frame the visa-free travel debate. Instead of engaging in debates such as those over “LGBTQ propaganda” or “war vs. peace,” the EU’s messaging should remain clear, consistent, and people-centered. As public opinion data show, 75% of Georgians believe the loss of visa-free travel would be harmful, while a vast majority still support EU integration despite the government’s provocations. The EU must speak directly to these citizens, not to the ruling elite. Brussels should make clear that visa liberalization was earned by the Georgian people—not their government—and that its suspension is a direct consequence of the Georgian Dream’s deliberate dismantling of democratic institutions and suppression of fundamental rights.

This narrative must emphasize that the EU does not wish to punish Georgians but rather seeks to protect the integrity of its democratic values. The

message should be anchored in empathy and solidarity: the EU continues to welcome Georgians but cannot overlook the repressive laws, political imprisonments, and erosion of judicial independence orchestrated by the ruling authorities. The EU should stress that the eight recommendations are not technocratic ultimatums but shared standards that Georgians themselves overwhelmingly endorse. Visa-free travel, in this light, becomes not just a policy benefit but a reflection of shared values—values currently under siege in Tbilisi.

***The EU must avoid being dragged into reactive, defensive posturing. There is no need to counter every smear or conspiracy pushed by pro-government media. Instead, the EU's message should stay focused on a proactive affirmation.***

Finally, the EU must avoid being dragged into reactive, defensive posturing. There is no need to counter every smear or conspiracy pushed by pro-government media. Instead, the EU's message should stay focused on a proactive affirmation: Georgia's future belongs in Europe and the EU stands with the Georgian people in their pursuit of freedom, dignity, and opportunity. It is the Georgian Dream—not Brussels—that threatens that future. Suspending visa-free travel would be a tragic consequence of autocratic regression, not European abandonment. The EU's credibility demands that it remain principled, but its communication must remain human, hopeful, and unmistakably aligned with the will of the Georgian people ■