

Fear and Loathing in Tbilisi

The rational choice explanation of Georgian Dream's confrontation with Brussels

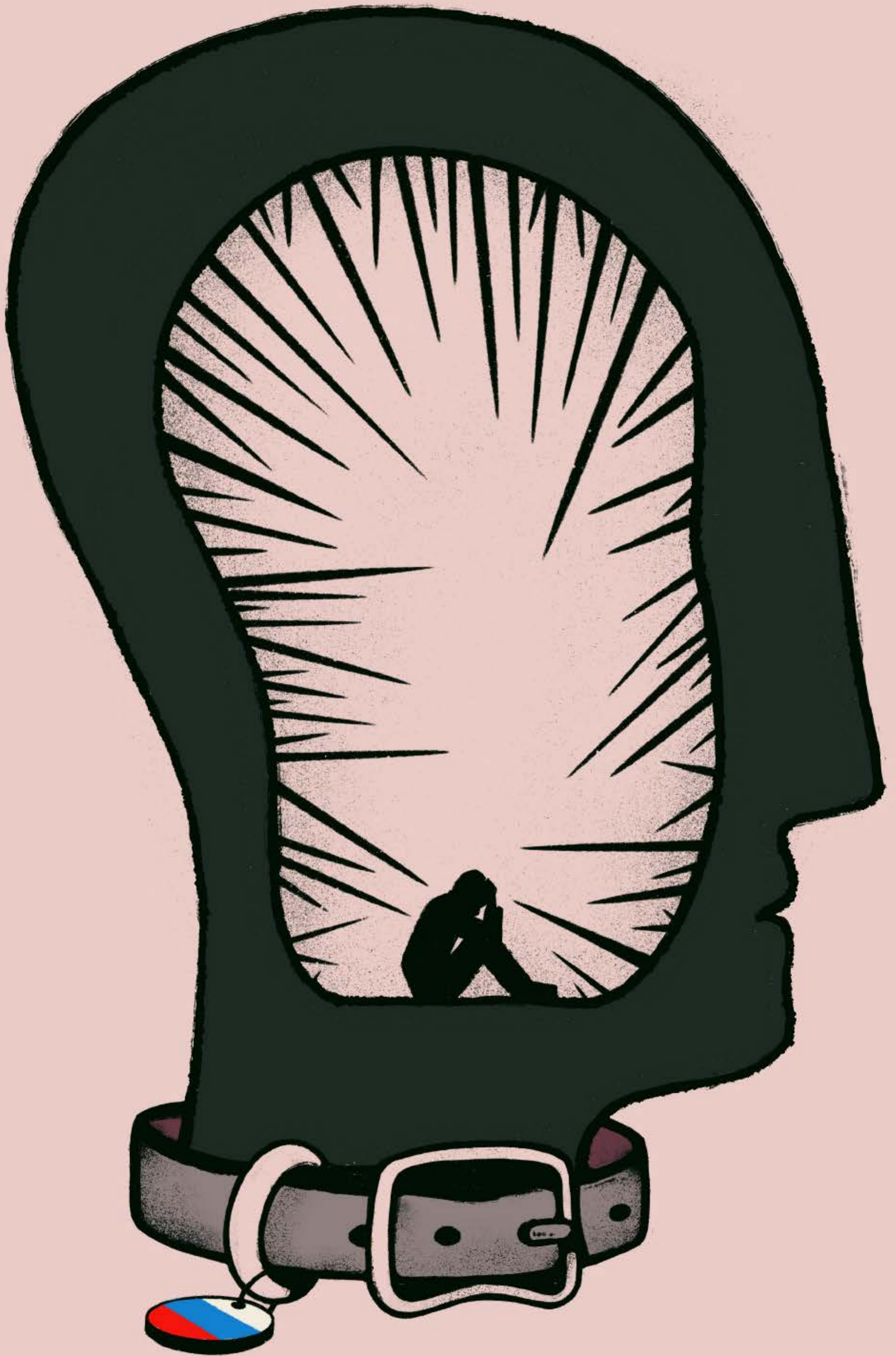
On November 8, the European Commission gave a positive recommendation to the member states regarding Georgia's candidacy to become a member of the European Union. As jubilating throngs laced many of the iconic locations of the capital, Tbilisi, one could not help but be overcome with an eerie feeling. Many Georgian diplomats have struggled for years to include the wording about "the European perspective" – the Commission's "shibboleth" for potential membership – in the Association Agreement. The AA, as it is often known, was finally signed in 2013 but was on the negotiating table for years, largely because of this very reason. When it was eventually signed, the wording included naming Georgia as an "Eastern European country" and "acknowledging the European aspirations and European choice of Georgia" – one of those "muddling through" compromises that obliged EU for nothing.

How the times have changed. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the "Geopolitical" Commission threw its doors open to Ukraine and its fellow members of the so-called "associated trio" – Moldova and Georgia. But even before that happened, and especially after Tbilisi filed the membership application, the top leadership of the ruling Georgian Dream party – including Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and party chairperson Irakli Kobakhidze spared no effort to berate the European Union and its various institutions, especially the European Parliament. These statements were echoed by the obliging

chorus of the ruling-party affiliated media, experts, and social media trolls.

Nor did they stop at words. By the last count, Georgia fulfilled only three of twelve relatively technical recommendations (read: conditions) for getting the candidacy. In the meantime, the ruling party has demonized the opposition and shrunk civic space to a considerable extent. The draft law on "Transparency of Foreign Funding," which would have hamstrung Georgia's vibrant civil society and whatever is left of the non-state-controlled media, was initiated by the ruling coalition (the opposition did not vote, while the three ruling party MPs who failed to vote "yes" were demoted and some forced to leave their MP mandates). Only massive – and rather surprising – public protest in March 2023 has forced the Georgian Dream to eat its hat and retract the law.

More importantly, Georgia's friends in Europe were taken aback by "bizarre" conspiracy theories that postulate the existence of the "global war party," which tries to drag Georgia into Russia's war with Ukraine. The conspiracy has been repeatedly aired at the highest formal political levels in Tbilisi. The alleged membership of the purported "global war party" varies. Still, PM Garibashvili and Chairman Kobakhidze have included Ukraine's top leadership, Georgian opposition, Georgian civil society leaders, some members of the European Parliament, EU, and U.S. donor agencies (USAID, EED),



specific U.S. non-governmental groups and also alluded to some ambassadors and executives from the U.S. and Europe.

A scholar of politics is left wondering – could such erratic behavior of Tbilisi be politically, or at least personally rational?

On the surface, looking at the outcomes, the policy did not backfire: Georgia got the candidacy, the unfulfilled recommendations were rolled over to the Council decision, and – given the short timeframe – might be rolled over further as preconditions to opening the accession negotiations. But this could have been a lucky outcome of risky opportunism: the shifting geopolitical winds could be blowing into Georgia's sails. The unrelenting support of the Georgian citizens to the EU membership also prevents Brussels from leaving Tbilisi out to dry: the electorates of Moldova and Ukraine (before the war) were far more divided on the issue than Georgians are.

But let us dig deeper.

Choices under uncertainty

We'd be advised to seek our initial clues into the nature of leadership in Georgia and the effect of the inherent incentives of such leadership on the nature of decision-making.

It is now widely acknowledged, both in academic analysis and in a political commentary, that the Georgian regime is oligarchic – that is, dominated by a person of considerable personal wealth – Bidzina Ivanishvili – who wields it to exercise political control over the normal state institutions. Some consider that the degree of such control has advanced to

the level of “state capture,” i.e., near-complete control of crucial institutions.

The fact that the cabinet of ministers is composed of Mr. Ivanishvili's personal aides, who often have very limited prior experience in the field of governance, testifies to a governance network based on personal allegiance rather than a democratic mandate.

Indeed, the EU's twelve recommendations/conditions highlight that their assessment essentially coincides with this view: the recommendation of “deoligarchization,” albeit vague in detail, is explicitly given, and several other ones go in the same vein: re-energizing independent institutions – courts, the public defender's office, anti-corruption agency, media, and civil society organizations.

It would be an exaggeration to think that “state capture” assumes the oligarch personally controls all governance decisions and the state's functioning. Mr. Ivanishvili has shown no inclinations of micro-management. Yet, it is reasonable to think that he is a crucial actor who can tilt the “raison d'état” in his favor whenever his major strategic interests are concerned.

This assumption reduces the usual complexity of internal state decision-making, with its multiple actors and diverging interests, to an almost hypothetical simplicity. Whenever it comes to crucial decisions, Mr. Ivanishvili's personal incentive structure prevails. From the point of view of the game theory, he is “the rational actor” who is engaged in an international “game” – a competitive interaction between rational actors whose interests conflict.

The European integration of Georgia is just a small part of a larger, high-stakes, tragic geopolitical game currently unfolding in Europe. Indeed, as argued above, the very possibility of Georgia integrating into the EU arose due to that game. Any game implies risks – for instance, a Georgian decision-maker must contend with Russia’s persisting military occupation of the two regions, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Having demonstrated its utter disrespect for international norms, not least by invading Georgia in 2008, Russia has considerably increased the odds of confrontation. So, there is a rational element of fear that may affect rational decision-making.

But a rational actor would also consider the probability of any additional military adventure by Moscow under the current circumstances or may strive to decrease such risks by, for example, beefing up its defenses – both in terms of military means and by seeking alliances. Conversely, the benefits of joining the European Union, or at least advancing rapidly on that path, are very high – at least in terms of prosperity and indirectly, through long-term stability that such a step may provide. In other words, generally, the current circumstances present a rational political actor with a high-risk game but also a high-gain one.

But what if we superimpose such conditions on an incentive structure that Mr Ivanishvili may face? Our information is limited, but some elements are in the public domain.

Firstly, Mr Ivanishvili’s capital has been made in Russia, and, according to most accounts, the Kremlin has consented to cash out and release these assets. It is reasonable to

assume that some financial obligations persist, and so do the more invisible, but no less tangible, expectations of loyalty. Both constitute the means of pressure. What is more, after Russia invaded Ukraine, [over thirty Russians](#) with considerable financial fortunes met with an untimely death [under suspicious circumstances](#). So, the element of fear weighs considerably more directly and presently in Mr Ivanishvili’s assessment of odds than it would for any other Georgian leader.

We can throw in a set of hypothetical positive externalities Mr. Ivanishvili may have, such as purely financial benefits from aiding influential partners from Russia to bypass or at least obfuscate the Western sanctions regime. A crucial element is time – both potential risks and benefits from Mr Ivanishvili’s “game” with Russia are short-term, personal, and near-immediate.

How does European integration look through Mr. Ivanishvili's incentive prism? First, the benefits of Georgia moving closer to and eventually joining the European Union will likely materialize in the medium to long term. While this process is ongoing, Russia can be rationally expected to counter-act – as it has threatened and done in Ukraine – especially personally in relation to Mr Ivanishvili and his assets.

Secondly, satisfying the conditions of Georgia’s accession to the European Union, such as the Copenhagen criteria of democratic governance and market economy, will likely dilute the oligarchic power. And even though Brussels has shown it is capable of co-existing with oligarchic regimes within the EU – after all, Czech ex-PM Andrej Babis or the

cronies of Hungary's Viktor Orbán may have derived considerable financial benefits from the EU largesse – still, such coexistence is rather uncomfortable.

In other words, personally, Mr Ivanishvili is facing higher (perhaps existential) costs in upsetting his friends in the Kremlin in the short run than he derives benefits from playing by the EU rules in the long run.

Still, people are known to take the odds of high risks if they feel long-term benefits outweigh them – after all, nearly 80% of Georgians think that EU membership would benefit them.

So why does not Mr. Ivanishvili follow the same logic? We may argue that he faces an additional, perhaps crucial, layer of complexity. Georgia's governing oligarch knows from the inside Russia and the particular way of functioning of Putin's gangster regime. He is certain of what they can do but uncertain about what they will do. He is also far more uncertain than many Europeans are about the outcome of the larger game – which he sees as a showdown between Russia and the collective West for influence in the region. In other words, Mr Ivanishvili is facing a high-stakes game under the conditions of uncertainty. Under risk, one may still lose, but one knows the odds. Under uncertainty, not only can one still lose, but one does not know the odds.

The 1961 classic [study](#) "Risk, Ambiguity, and the Savage Axioms" by Daniel Ellsberg demonstrated that people prefer a risky choice to an uncertain one. In 1993, John Orbell [argued](#) in his "Hamlet and the Psychology of Rational Choice Under Uncertain-

ty" that the rational response to the problem of such uncertainty is to find a way around it, to avoid the problem, hoping to reduce uncertainty in the meantime.

That is a crucial distinction – (even) rational actors facing high-stakes decisions would prefer reducing uncertainty to risking or making efforts to affect the odds (negative or positive). In other words, their rational behavior is passive, based on avoidance of any decision.

Fear and loathing

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As shown above, the crucial decision-maker in Georgian politics at the current moment is mainly motivated by fear, which is augmented by uncertainty. One of the ways to reduce uncertainty is to avoid the problem and delay the decision until a higher degree of certainty is established.

Yet, even oligarchic leaders cannot govern against the people's will, and in times of crisis, people expect and demand action from their political leaders. One of the key elements of this demanded action in Georgia is seeking a political "shelter" inside the Western institutions, particularly the EU, as witnessed by massive public rallies when such movement was considered hampered.

To overcome the conundrum between the personal imperative to refrain from action and the democratic demand to do something, Georgia's governing party has been deploying the rhetoric as a tool for "the ne-

gotiation of the distance between protagonists on a given question,” as Michel Meyer [explained](#) in his “What is Rhetoric?”

In responding to these challenges, official Tbilisi has been borrowing heavily from one of the leading ideologues of the “illiberal Europe,” Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, who, incidentally, became one of the key lobbyists for Georgia’s European integration. The commonality of context and an instinctive ideological affinity are likely to have drawn Tbilisi towards Budapest. Just like the Georgian Dream government, Orbán’s Fidesz had to work with a widely pro-European electorate to further its hold on power. As Greg Agoston [showed](#), Orbán successfully devised a set of rhetorical approaches to define its political legitimacy in pursuing the national interest and portraying EU membership as a means to serve those interests better – often counter to the intentions of the EU institutions and other members.

In the same vein, the Georgian Dream uses two related rhetorical reasonings to increase its proximity with the majority of the voters while simultaneously increasing the distance from the European/Western actors. On the one hand, the Georgian Dream attempts to prove that the concerns and fears of the oligarch are intricately linked with the fears of the Georgian nation. On the other hand, Georgian Dream portrays Ivanishvili and the Georgian people in the same camp, resisting European pressure and defending Georgia’s national interests from Western encroachment.

Oligarch’s fears are people’s fears!

The first rhetorical line is to generalize the

oligarch’s fears onto the general population (the nation) and, by doing so, to seek equivalence rhetorically and perceptively between the stance of Mr Ivanishvili and the national interest. In other words, the Georgian Dream wants Georgians to believe that inaction on the war in Ukraine and passiveness (or even resistance) to fulfilling the demands of the European Union are in the national interest.

The most obvious and perhaps most blatant instance of building such equivalence was [made by Bidzina Ivanishvili himself](#) in an open letter, that “certain forces actively tried to drag Georgia into the [Ukraine] war, and this desire and goal of theirs, unfortunately, is still relevant today” while the ruling party “worked correctly, took a correct and principled position, and overcame the main difficulty of the first stage of the threat of war.” In the same statement, Mr. Ivanishvili formally dismissed but rhetorically confirmed the alleged linkage between the war conspiracy that his party pundits have been advancing and his personal financial problems with Credit Suisse Bank. The chair of the Georgian Dream [argued](#) that by creating difficulties for Ivanishvili to access some of the assets at Credit Suisse, “someone is attempting to make Bidzina Ivanishvili return to Georgian politics against his will so that the country joins the [Ukraine] war.” To further decrease the distance from voters, Ivanishvili said that the money was intended for public benefit.

The Georgian Dream leaders often present Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine as a “punishment” for its overzealous pro-Western foreign policy. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili [claimed that](#) “any patriotic government must do everything to help the country and its people avoid the greatest ca-

lamiy, the ordeal, which is war. I am acting in this spirit, with this responsibility.”

The demand for action – which is, as we have shown, contrary to the oligarch’s imperative to avoid doing so – is equated with “insisting that Georgia joins the war.” In March 2023, when pro-European protests engulfed the capital, Garibashvili [pleaded](#) – “let’s imagine that there is a war in Georgia today; we all know what will happen here – our beautiful country will turn into a firing range. This is not an exaggeration; this is a real threat!”

Europe of sovereign interests

The second rhetorical line that Georgian Dream pursues is to create a perception that Mr. Ivanishvili and the Georgian nation stand together against malicious Western/European actors, but without negating the objective of (eventually) joining the European Union. This approach aims to reconcile the declared pro-European stance of the majority of Georgians with the increasingly Euro-skeptic rhetoric of the Georgian government. This closely follows the tactics of Viktor Orban, who used the migration crisis to set himself as a protector of the national interest against Western European supranationalism.

In Hungary, Orban presented the foreign policy tradition of the socialist-liberal governments as “euroservile,” arguing that Hungary “will not be a colony” and describing its skirmishes with Brussels about human rights as a “freedom fight.” In Georgia, Garibashvili – drawing on the context of the war in Ukraine – [pledged](#) that he, as “a person responsible to our country’s populace and as the head of government, responsible for do-

mestic as well as foreign policy, will lead based on national interests.” An MP affiliated with the ruling majority [coined the phrase](#) “Dignity is above the EU candidacy” in 2022, and by 2023, “To Europe with Dignity” became the Georgian Dream’s EU policy’s [slogan](#).

Like Budapest, Tbilisi also says sovereignty is a prime factor in its future relationship with Europe. The Christian identity and concerns about natality and migration [undergird these notions of sovereignty](#) – a stance strongly supported by the Georgian Orthodox Church. While visiting Tbilisi, Viktor Orban [stressed Georgia’s Christian identity](#) as the main marker of its European identity. Just like Orban, Tbilisi pursues cultural and civili-zation distancing from Western Europe, ar-guing for the preservation of the conserva-tive Christian traditions against the purport-ed onslaught of “immoral” liberal values. At the same time, it portrays Georgia as a pro-tagonist of “true” or “traditional” Europe, which has nothing to learn from and nothing to prove to the West.

Through this rhetorical feat, the Georgian Dream attempts to portray itself on the side of the Georgian people and simultaneously for Europe, but against the current Western elite of the European Union.

Conclusion

The current government in Tbilisi is strongly beholden to the personal interests of one man, Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose personal loyalties and personal financial interests are, in turn, linked to Moscow. The uncertainty of the current political moment creates unpre-

dictable, existential risks for Mr Ivanishvili, and his primary incentive, motivated by fear, is to do nothing until the uncertainty recedes.

The Georgian Dream government is projecting this motivation structure onto the Georgian population, insisting it serves the national interest. Yet, despite the rhetorical contraptions deployed, this is not necessarily the case. While the fog of war indeed warrants pragmatism, the true pragmatic approach would have also dictated, for example, increased military spending and procurement of air defense capabilities, caution towards migratory flows from Russia, cultivation of the relationship of trust with the Western partners, in particular the U.S. and the EU. Yet, the contrary steps are taken.

Tbilisi, driven by self-interest, adopts the public relations and rhetoric devices not so much directly from Russia but increasingly from the European and U.S. “illiberal leaders,” such as Viktor Orban and Donald Trump.

Hungary’s membership in the European Union is a powerful domestic argument for the sovereignist, identitarian stance being compatible with the European identity. Yet, there is a significant difference: Georgia is seeking membership in the European club, already irked by Orban’s intransigence. Adopting “Orbanist” cliches is thus clearly not in Georgia’s long-term national interest, even in the narrow sense of seeking EU membership.

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It is worrying that the Georgian Dream is succeeding in drawing the dividing line in a way that positions Georgian voters on the same side with sovereignist and identitarian discourse against the EU values. Fear of war and the concern about Europe being damaging to the preservation of Georgia’s national identity have crept up significantly in the opinion polls, largely due to the Georgian Dream media machine churning out the relevant content through both traditional and online media, aided by the army of paid accounts and fake campaigns.

Certainly, Georgia’s democratic class and civil society are primarily responsible for responding to these domestic challenges. Yet, the European Union and the European capitals must learn lessons from the damaging impact of populist and illiberal rhetoric of the electorate and democratic institutions of Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. As fears of populist revival in key European states – France and Germany – mount, open partnership and clear communication between democratic actors are the only way to reduce uncertainties sufficiently to break the democratic paralysis. The European actors must work together to fill the political and rhetorical arguments for stronger integration, a higher degree of solidarity, and more democracy with real meaning to the Union’s current and aspiring citizens.

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Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading the political office of OSCE in Belgrade from 2009 to 2011 and serving as the Director for International Organizations (UN, CoE, OSCE) at the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011-2012. Currently, as a volunteer co-editor for Europe Herald, a Civil.ge project (FB/@EuropeHerald), Devdariani dedicates his expertise to elucidating European current affairs for a broader audience.