

Wind of Change

Wild is the Wind

Weathervanes across foreign policy establishments are spinning fast—the wind of change is blowing powerfully. Narratives, such as "interdependency avoids confrontation," yet again succumb to the grievances of something lost, be it an empire or a chance. Verbally expressed revanchism and the desire to redraw the world map have started to be followed by very much visible, and not virtual, kinetic actions with midlevel brutality seemingly extinct from our advanced and post-modern society.

It is hard to imagine, let alone articulate, practical "win-win" scenarios for the Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Hamas wars. The world is descending back into the zero-sum game where irreconcilable differences in ideology or methodology will prevent aggressors and victims from peacefully sharing the "common space."

Both conflicts confirm the enormous relevance of international order and the proper institutional mechanisms to maintain it, but they also expose the inadequacies and dysfunctions in existing multilateral, inclusive institutions. Shockwaves and hurricanes caused by both conflicts put these organizations in a role like Marilyn Monroe's notorious image, embarrassingly trying to remain unexposed.

Signs of inadequacy were already visible during the COVID-19 pandemic when national interests, local regulations, and tech-

nological advancements reminded us of the role of nation-states, underlining intrinsic inequalities and pushing back global agendas like climate change.

Waves of migrants to the US and Europe are not only affecting the fabric of local societies but are also generating counter-waves of a poetic and ideological kind. Walls, fences, and separation are becoming valuable instruments again, and a time when "the wall" referred to either in the Pink Floyd album or the architectural marvel of Chinese history is gone. Now, more brutal connotations, like the Iron Curtain or the Berlin Wall, are back in play.

Wars and confrontations are not the only reasons for the wind of changes. If we are in the midst of the fourth industrial revolution, then disruptive innovations of new industries will eventually affect politics, economics, and security on a global scale as they did during the previous three revolutions.

The year 2024 will be crucial. According to The Economist, half the world's population will go to elections in 76 countries. The remaining popularity of Donald Trump and the shocking presidential election results in Argentina might indicate a new trend in electoral politics. The year 2024 will signify a power struggle for autocrats to remain in power or the desire of the populations of democratic countries to see dramatic changes in the ways and the personalities conducting those policies. Selected, elected, or self-appointed officials will have the task of



navigating global challenges, and depending on the personalities in charge, political winds can blow in any unpredictable direction.

Georgia is among those 76 countries, and the results of the parliamentary election in the autumn of 2024 will largely determine the adequacy of the country and its political elite to withstand the challenges of global change.

[Candle in the Wind](#)

Amid the turbulence of international affairs, Georgia is not well-seated or properly fastened, probably not even in an appropriate place. Just a decade ago, Georgia was "punching above its weight," but those times are gone.

As a matter of fact, the current Georgian government has literally no international friend, sympathizer, or supporter besides the Hungarian Viktor Orbán, whose "friendship" is just an exception that proves the rule. The foreign policy agenda remains foggy and contradictory, to say the least.

It should not be surprising, as the de facto governor/owner of Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili, declared from the beginning of his rule that Georgia should not be a "subject" of foreign policy but merely an "object." He publicly [praised](#) the "Armenian model" of foreign policy, which ended up disastrous for Armenia. He promised to "surprise Europe" with Georgian democracy, and Europe is truly surprised at how democracy in Georgia degraded so fast. He openly stated that the visitation of Western countries would "corrupt" Georgians, and now the number of Georgian asylum seekers in Europe and the US competes with similar numbers per capita from

war-torn countries.

How did Georgia, from being called a "beacon of liberty" and a "champion of transformation," end up in geopolitical limbo in just a decade?

The peaceful leadership change in the 2012 elections was mostly considered a step forward for Georgian democracy. The West's self-imposed "fatigue from mercurial Saakashvili" and the desire to either "reset" relations with Russia or continue "business as usual" created the illusion that Georgia would cement the achievements of the previous government and leap forward to economic prosperity and further institutional reforms under the Georgian Dream and its policy of the "normalization of relations with Russia." Multiple pieces of evidence that the anti-democratic behavior of the Georgian Dream and its leaders were undermining the democratic institutions in the country raised eyebrows among Georgia-supporters, but they labeled it as "zigzagging" in the right direction.

The further decline of political and democratic institutions really "surprised Europe," but internal discontent was labeled "polarization," implying that a negotiated solution could decrease tensions and advance the EU and NATO integration agendas. Realistically, the leadership of the Georgian Dream does not seek any "win-win" solution and does not want to compromise or weaken its grip on power for the sake of integration into the aforementioned institutions. That attitude was revealed multiple times, notably by breaking EU-negotiated deals with the opposition and avoiding any practical steps that would expedite or accelerate Georgia's inte-

gration into the EU or NATO.

The war in Ukraine became a tipping point when the poorly disguised anti-Western sentiments of the Georgian Dream manifested themselves into openly anti-Western rhetoric and actions. Distancing the country from the Western sanctions imposed on Russia, the groundless accusations of the West attempting to "drag Georgia into the war" and "instigating revolutionary changes" further widened the eyes of Georgia-watchers. The "surprise" quickly transformed into shock with a persistent feeling of nausea. Consequently, dealing with Georgia became a futile exercise for foreign policy practitioners, resulting in the disappearance of the whole country from the vocabulary of international issues discussed on major regional and global forums and platforms and from the active foreign relations agenda.

Even though every opinion poll conducted during the last decade still indicates strong support for Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration (i.e., membership in the EU and NATO), the policies and the actions of the Georgian government often contradict popular aspirations. Ignoring recommendations from various EU or US institutions, the Venice Commission, or the OSCE/ODHIR became an unfortunate routine. Meanwhile, the Russian-style political jargon of "sovereign democracy," clearly anti-democratic legislative initiatives, like the "law on foreign agents," accusatory language towards any criticism from Europe or America, be it individual or institutional, leave little doubt about the true intentions of the ruling elite and its puppet master.

If foreign policy reflects domestic policy, we

should not be astounded. Any Georgia-watcher understands that the major decisions in Georgia are only made with the blessing of or by Bidzina Ivanishvili from his compounds surrounded by his private zoo. We can safely assume that Georgia is the only country in the world governed literally from the zoo. The same observers can notice another unfortunate trend: the first president died under questionable circumstances, being hunted; a popular revolution ousted the second president; the third one is jailed and most likely poisoned; the fourth is stripped of any post-presidential privileges (pension, security, etc.) and the incumbent president is isolated, ostracized and just survived an impeachment.

As a result of the decade-long rule of the Georgian Dream, the political process in Georgia has almost ceased to exist. Political opposition, independent media, and independent non-governmental organizations are constantly labeled as "destructive," "enemies of the state," and "foreign agents." It is hard to recall the last time government officials engaged in public debate or discussion on TV or any other format about the issues of vital importance for Georgia. Rhetoric is followed by actions, too: political opponents are often persecuted, physically harassed, jailed, and intimidated. Such treatment of opponents then translates into the local and national elections, undermining their fairness, freedom of choice, and legitimacy.

Frustrated political opposition, civil society, and the media actively seek support and a sympathetic ear among external enthusiasts of Georgia's modernization, democratization, and Westernization. Against the background of silent and hibernating Georgian

diplomacy, the aforementioned groups are more visible actors in Georgian foreign policy than state officials. These groups do not coordinate among themselves and often compete fiercely. Nevertheless, their activities largely keep Georgia on the foreign policy agenda and the radar screens of the Western policy crafters and policymakers. Unlike the current government, this highly unusual "alternative diplomacy" effectively convinces Western friends and allies that the Georgian people still deserve their support. Without false modesty and exaggeration, we can safely state that granting Georgia the EU candidate status, alongside geopolitical considerations, was a result of such "alternative diplomacy."

Gone with the Wind

Self-imposed challenges and missing opportunities dominate Georgian foreign policy.

Self-imposed challenges and missing opportunities dominate Georgian foreign policy. Previous achievements were supposed to serve as a springboard to advance the foreign policy agenda, but it seems like the agenda has been cryptically modified and priorities reshuffled. It is not only the strategic trajectory of Georgia's foreign policy that is worrisome, but the cascade of dubious choices in bilateral and multilateral relations creates a heavy burden on Georgia's foreign policy.

From being a champion among the Eastern Neighborhood Policy (ENP) countries of the EU, Georgia became one of the most problematic cases. Individual EU member countries no longer hide their frustration with the inconsistent policies of the Georgian government. The consensus to grant Georgia the EU

candidate status reflects not the current achievements but further hopes and additional conditions that still need to be satisfied.

The US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter envisages the yearly visitation of senior government officials, the US Secretary of State, and the Prime Minister of Georgia. No such visit has occurred during the Biden administration, which is self-explanatory and sums up the current state of affairs well. On top of that, the erosion of the relationship is not only with the US executive branch. Every critical word from members of the Senate, Congress, or the mainstream media is "interpreted" by the Georgian Dream as the result of the lobbying activities of enemies and/or friends of the previous government while ignoring the merits of the concerns. The same fate is shared by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), USAID, and many other US-based institutions that "dare" to criticize the Georgian Dream and its leadership.

Georgia's immediate neighborhood is undergoing drastic changes, but the relationship with the neighbors is not handled any better. Conventional logic would dictate that one of the fiercest supporters of Ukraine should be Georgia, given so many similarities between them, whether the shared Orthodox Christian belief or the Russian aggression and occupation of both countries' territories. Nevertheless, among its neighbors, Georgia's worst relations are with Ukraine. Downgraded diplomatic relations reflect the hostile attitude of the political leadership of both countries toward each other. The deliberate policy of the Georgian government is not only to exclude itself from Western sanctions

against Russia but also to open avenues of cooperation with Russia, enabling loopholes for avoiding sanctions. The so-called "Saakashvili factor" is not the major impediment but "a cherry on the top." The demonization of the Ukrainian leadership in the mainstream pro-governmental media is almost a routine for the Georgian Dream.

Azerbaijan's impressive strides in foreign policy are noticeable against the background of its victory in Nagorno-Karabakh and the changing energy landscape of Europe due to Russian sanctions. At the same time, what used to be a dynamic relationship between Azerbaijan and Georgia since President Shevardnadze has now been transformed into a "maintenance mode" – merely handling the existing cooperation and shying away from any new and meaningful bilateral or regional projects.

Against the background of losing Nagorno-Karabakh, for the first time in its recent history, Armenia started to question its overdependence on Russia seriously and is exploring avenues of intensified relations with the West. Given its landlocked geography, Georgia can play a crucial role in approximating Armenia with the West, expanding stability and prosperity in the region. Instead, the Georgian leadership is peddling an unrealistic role of being an intermediary between Armenia and Azerbaijan, lacking any capacity or vision to perform such a function.

Turkey may change its name for foreigners to pronounce, but the essence of President Erdogan's foreign policy remains steady. Out of the declared "zero problems with neighbors" policy, perhaps Georgia was the only neighbor with indeed zero problems with

Turkey. Instead of properly capitalizing on this factor, Turkish-Georgian bilateral activities increased by zero percent and continued with the same intensity and dynamism as any legacy relationship.

Leadership changes in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and both countries' proactive foreign policy agendas opened new opportunities for engagement. At this moment, however, one can only notice the active operation of former Georgian government officials in the reform agendas of both countries and Georgia's private business initiatives, both well-established and highly valued. Central Asian countries actively diversify trade with Europe through alternative (to Russia) corridors. Nevertheless, Georgia is missing out on an opportunity to boost its role by introducing extra incentives and relevant government policies.

Moldova used to look at Georgia's transformation with envy and fascination. Today, it is shying away from any affiliation with Georgia, especially regarding its EU aspirations.

Russia, on the other hand, has become the „best friend“ of the Georgian Dream.

Russia, on the other hand, has become the „best friend“ of the Georgian Dream. Renewed flights (despite an aerial blockade from the West), not joining the Western sanctions, expanding economic cooperation with Russia (grown by several hundred percent), lifting visa restrictions by Russia and the inflow of questionable Russian capital, together with over a hundred thousand Russians, allegedly fleeing the war and sanctions, indicate this "friendship." Allegations

that Georgia is used to circumvent Western sanctions were [lauded](#) in the West. The Georgian opposition noticed the usage of Georgian ports for transporting sanctioned Russian oil and oil products. Leaked telephone conversations also support the notion that the country's leadership is in cahoots with certain Russian agencies and oligarchs.

[Ride the Wild Wind](#)

If the world around Georgia is changing, one can ask why the passive foreign policy, or as the government loves to call it - "stability," is a wrong choice and what the other alternatives are.

The best place to start will probably be with the father of scientific history and political realism, Thucydides. Three major factors that Thucydides identifies as the drivers of state decision-making in peace and war are fear (phobos/φοβος) or security, belief/honor (doxa/δοξα) or religion/ideology and interest (kerdos/κερδος) or livelihood/economy.

Security - Unless Georgia miraculously develops into the Israel of the Caucasus overnight, the ability to address security challenges alone or with minor external help is non-existent. Some naively believe in "neutrality," forgetting that neutrality is not just about one's decision but also the consensus of its neighbors. Given its geographic location and neighborhood, Georgia has never in its history managed to be a "neutral state," nor will it work now. The only remaining choice, therefore, is to be in a military alliance with only two on the menu - Western NATO or Russian CSTO. As George Kennan accurately observed, the Kremlin can distin-

guish only vassals and enemies in its neighborhood; hence, neither "neutrality" nor the CSTO are viable options for independent Georgia.

Meanwhile, NATO has proven to be one of the most durable, trustworthy, effective, and transformative alliances in modern history, even ready to consider Georgia as a member one day. But for the Georgian Dream, NATO membership is no longer on the agenda. The Prime Minister clearly stated that membership can only be possible after Russia solves the problem of Georgia's occupied regions, i.e., never.

Ideology - Samuel Huntington predicted a clash of civilizations where Orthodox Christianity was considered one of them. What we are observing now looks more like a clash within civilization. Orthodox Russia is at war with Orthodox Georgia and Orthodox Ukraine, with Muslim countries fighting each other more than the "infidels." Although Georgian history is mainly associated with being part of oriental empires, modern Georgians consider themselves part of the Western, Judeo-Christian world. The bitter experience of the Russian/Soviet empires further pushed Georgia toward the West, which successfully survived the collapse of imperialism and totalitarian ideologies and generated an attractive "soft power" to admire and one to aspire to. The younger generation of Georgians already considers a long list of Western values their own and wants to see an adequate political manifestation of their beliefs. In contrast, the Georgian Dream beats the anti-Western drum, claiming that it is the leading proponent of Christian, conservative values and that the West is pushing them to embrace same-sex marriage and the protec-

tion of LGBTQI+ groups.

Economy – Georgians enviously observed how former Eastern Bloc countries successfully transformed their failing economies through aspiration and integration into the European Union. At the same time, Russo-centric economies became highly vulnerable to manipulations from the Kremlin because of energy blackmail, halting exported goods for being “contaminated” and “poisonous,” declaring total trade embargos and weaponizing remittances and migration. In private corridors, Georgians hear multiple complaints from members of the Eurasian Economic Union about how the EU’s restrictive measures on Russia hurt their economies. Meanwhile, the echoes of problematic Chinese investments and assistance also reach Georgia. Given its geographic location, Georgia can play a vital role in east-west trade, being a reliable economic outpost of the EU in this axis. Therefore, Georgia’s membership in the EU is not only a civilizational choice but a practical, prosperity-oriented one. In contrast, the Georgian Dream lost a year and a half for receiving the candidate status recommendation from the EU, slow-rolled the reforms necessary for fast-tracking European integration, and dramatically increased its dependence on the Russian economy.

The issue of two Georgian regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, currently under Russian occupation, will remain on Georgia’s foreign policy agenda. Restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity is only feasible under two essential conditions: a strong and attractive Georgia and fundamental changes in Russian behavior in its neighborhood. Neither of these conditions can be achieved if Georgia remains

under Russian political or economic influence. Thus, the aspiration to see both provinces back under Georgia’s internationally recognized borders requires vigorously intensifying Georgia’s EU and NATO membership efforts.

In a nutshell, the wind of change is more challenging for inclusive regional and international organizations like the OSCE and the UN, whereas exclusive organizations, like the EU and NATO, are considered functional instruments poised to shape the upcoming European and international security order. Therefore, a country like Georgia needs to be part of the shaping mechanisms rather than part of a collapsing “Russian world” or a failed Chinese domination.

Western observers are often caught by surprise when Russian policies contradict Russian national interests, and the only rational explanation can be personal greed and a desire by the ruling elite to cling to power indefinitely. Unfortunately, the same logic applies to today’s Georgia, where state capture is evident by one super-rich man and his minions, where state interests are subjugated to personal phobias and greed.

If Georgia remains on the menu, it will sooner or later be served at somebody’s table.

As foreign policy experts love to say: “If you are not at the table, you are on the menu.” If Georgia remains on the menu, it will sooner or later be served at somebody’s table. Therefore, it is essential to produce a domestic wind of change, resulting in the reacquisition of the state by the people of Georgia for the people of Georgia. ■

read about the contributor →



Temuri Yakobashvili
Contributor

Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili distinguishes himself as an accomplished leader in government, crisis management, and diplomacy. As the founder of TY Strategies LLC, he extends advisory services globally. A pivotal figure in co-founding the Revival Foundation, aiding Ukraine, and leading the New International Leadership Institute, Yakobashvili held key roles, including Georgia's Ambassador to the U.S. and Deputy Prime Minister. With the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, he is a Yale World Fellow, trained at Oxford and Harvard. As a co-founder and chair of the Governing Board of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, he actively contributes to global media discussions on regional security. His significant contributions have merited the Presidential Medal of Excellence.