

Mortal Kombat for Georgia's Future

On November 28, Georgian Dream (GD) unilaterally [dismantled](#) Georgia's path to EU membership in clear violation of the Constitution, triggering mass protests. While the outcome remains uncertain, the stakes are unequivocal—this is a zero-sum confrontation for Georgia's future. Either the country succumbs to full authoritarianism, mirroring Russia and Belarus, or reverses course toward democracy and European integration. In this battle, there will be a casualty: if GD prevails, democracy, civil society, free media, and political opposition will be eradicated. If GD falls, Bidzina Ivanishvili and his inner circle will lose their impunity, prosperity, and possibly prosecution.

These protests did not emerge from a vacuum but from years of democratic erosion. In the weeks leading up to November 28, Ivanishvili's regime doubled down on its authoritarian playbook. Elections were [rigged](#) through ballot secrecy violations, vote-buying, and elaborate carousels, delivering an engineered 53% victory to GD. When opposition parties and the president challenged

the results, a Constitutional Court stacked with GD loyalists, [dismissed](#) the appeal, granting legitimacy to the Parliamentary session, which was convened without opposition representation. Ignoring international observers' critiques, GD rubberstamped its government and escalated repression against political opponents, civil society, and the media.

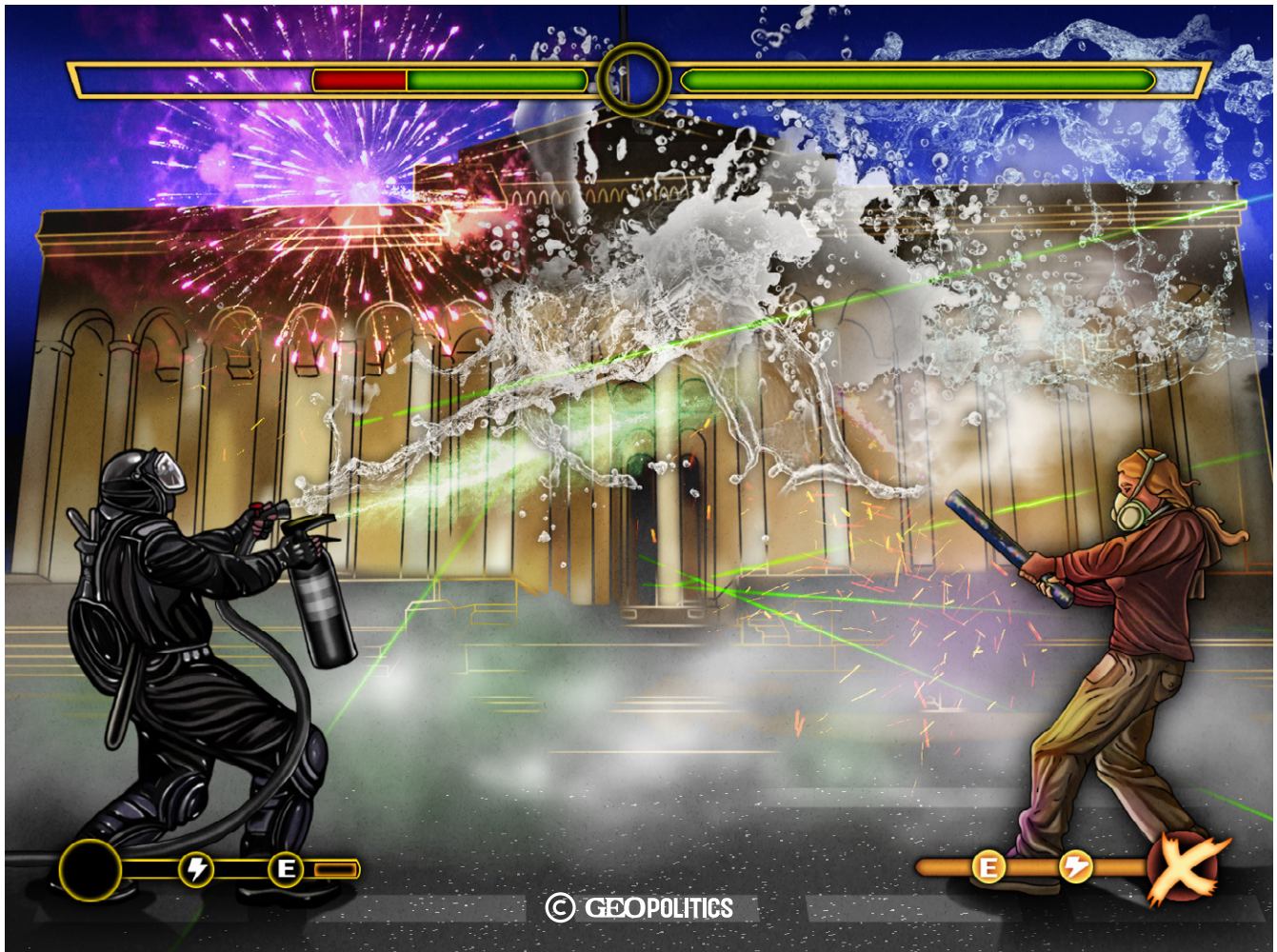
The November 28 announcement by Irakli Kobakhidze that Georgia would abandon its EU membership ambitions marked the culmination of this authoritarian entrenchment. Although Kobakhidze claimed GD would continue implementing the Association Agreement and DCFTA, these instruments, widely recognized as insufficient for EU accession, were misleadingly touted as adequate alternatives.

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The public's response, however, defied expectations. Spontaneous, horizontal protests erupted nationwide, transcending traditional political affiliations. On the evening of November 28, the initial gathering near Parliament drew just a handful of outraged citizens. Within hours, the crowd swelled to 50,000—a number that has remained steady, fueled by grassroots outrage and a shared resolve to resist GD's betrayal. All opposition political forces coordinated but not unified under the leadership of President Salome Zourabichvili are on the same page – resist the GD or be destroyed.

At its core, this confrontation is the product of Ivanishvili's oligarchic system—a gamble to centralize power at the expense of Georgia's democratic identity. Since 2012, and especially after 2020, the Georgian Dream has systematically consolidated power by [capturing](#) key state institutions and sidelining constitutional processes, which are

often [highlighted](#) in this journal. The judiciary, regulatory bodies like the Central Election Commission, and state institutions have all been brought under party control. One of the few institutions still maintaining some autonomy, the presidency, is set to lose it with the imminent appointment of a party-aligned former football player without formal education.

The stakes are existential, not just for the regime but for the Georgian people. Should Ivanishvili prevail, the country will lose the institutions and freedoms that have defined its modern European aspirations. If the protests succeed, it could begin Georgia's return to democracy and its rightful place in Europe. One thing is clear: the nation is at a breaking point, with no path forward that spares either Ivanishvili or the Georgian people from a decisive reckoning.

Different Kind of Resistance

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Georgia's history with protests on Rustaveli Avenue tells a compelling story of resilience and the people's capacity to shape their nation's destiny. Time and again, Georgians have gathered in front of the Parliament building, often starting from a place of vulnerability and ending as victors. While temporary setbacks have occurred, Rustaveli Avenue remains a symbol of collective defiance and hope, as its significance has repeatedly intersected with Georgia's critical historical moments.

In 1989, Georgians faced the Soviet military's brutal crackdown, with Russian soldiers wielding shovels and using poison gas to disperse peaceful protesters. Yet, just two years later, the country declared independence, and [April 9](#) became a symbol of the Georgian spirit and a reminder of "never again" spilling the blood of peaceful demonstrators. Protests in 2001-2003, in 2001-2003 brought a victory again, as the public's outrage against the government's interference with Rustavi 2 forced the [resignation](#) of the Interior Minister, paving the way for the transformative Rose Revolution of 2003.

From 2006 to 2011, Rustaveli became a stage for both triumph and tragedy. Protests following the murder of Sandro Girgvliani highlighted systemic abuses but ended with violent [dispersals](#) in 2007. The backlash forced Mikheil Saakashvili to resign and call elections, which he narrowly won. Subsequent demonstrations, such as the failed "city of tents" in 2009 and the May 26, 2011 rally, saw protesters violently [removed](#)—a move that later led to charges against Saakashvili and his ministers. These protests ultimately laid the groundwork

for Ivanishvili's political debut and the rise of the Georgian Dream in 2012.

Post-2012, Rustaveli Avenue became quieter until sporadic protests reignited public fervor. Demonstrations in [2018](#) against nightclub raids and in [2019](#) over Russian Communist Party MP Sergey Gavrilov's appearance in Parliament resulted in tangible victories, such as electoral reforms and high-profile resignations. However, the use of rubber bullets and police violence during the 2019 protests underscored the escalating use of force by Georgian Dream.

The pro-European [demonstrations](#) of 2022-2023, fueled by the government's reluctance to support Ukraine and failure to secure EU candidate status, marked a shift. Massive rallies, especially in 2023, pressured the government to [withdraw](#) the controversial "foreign agents" bill. Still, Georgian Dream's authoritarian tendencies persisted, culminating in the [reintroduction](#) of the Law in Spring 2024, the rigged elections of October 2024, and the current decision to abandon EU integration.

Whether currently ongoing protests will follow the path of past triumphs or become a rare exception remains uncertain. Georgia's history suggests that Rustaveli Avenue often catalyzes change, but with the Georgian Dream's increased use of force, the outcome is anything but assured.

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from previous demonstrations on Rustaveli Avenue. First and foremost, it is not orchestrated by the opposition, as evidenced by the absence of stages, microphones, or political speeches—hallmarks of earlier movements. Instead, it is a grassroots, citizen-driven protest marked by raw anger and determination not to give up Georgia's European future. Protesters are willing to confront the police directly, yet they maintain a strict commitment to nonviolence. Second, this is a protest of the youth—students, schoolchildren, and young professionals have taken center stage, bringing fresh energy and resolve. Third, the level of preparedness and self-organization is unprecedented. Protesters equip themselves with gas masks, raise funds collectively, and use creative tools like fireworks, which have become a symbolic form of resistance. By shooting fireworks at police, they create discomfort without causing substantial harm. Remarkably, there are no Molotov cocktails, vandalism, or car burnings—practices often seen in European protests.

Why Now and Why At All?

Many wonder why Bidzina Ivanishvili decided to reject the EU path openly. Why make such an explicit declaration when simply “failing” to meet EU criteria would have led to the same result?

The first part of the answer lies in the timing. Ivanishvili likely made this move because the protests against the fraudulent elections had lost momentum. As public energy waned, he executed what he had hinted at in April: waiting for dissent to fade before making a bold, divisive decision. The European Parliament's stern [resolution](#) provided a convenient pretext, as the announcement came just hours after its adoption. Thus, the timing appears calculated to capitalize on the temporary lull in resistance.

The second and more significant question is: why Ivanishvili chose to reject the EU so overtly at all?

No plausible explanation exists without considering Moscow's role. This move aligns with Russia's interest in firmly cementing Georgia within its sphere of influence. With Trump reentering the White House in January and a potential settlement of the Ukraine conflict on the horizon, Ivanishvili and the Kremlin may want to eliminate any ambiguity about Georgia's geopolitical alignment. By preemptively removing Georgia from the EU accession track, they ensure that the country is off the table in any future negotiations involving Russia.

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Domestically, abandoning the EU track also serves Ivanishvili's desire for unchecked authority. EU conditionality has long acted as a constraint on authoritarian impulses, with economic, financial, and security support from the West tied to democratic reforms. By removing this leverage, Ivanishvili frees himself from external scrutiny, giving him *carte blanche* to suppress political opponents and tighten his grip on power without fear of international consequences.

Another factor may be Ivanishvili's personal paranoia and impulsiveness. The decision appears to have been imposed suddenly, as neither GD leaders nor formal government program hinted at such a shift before or immediately after the elections. The Speaker of Parliament's anti-EU rhetoric on public television the night before the announcement was the first significant signal. This suggests that the decision could have been made unilaterally by Ivanishvili and imposed on his team, which is composed of loyalists and dependent figures unlikely to challenge him. His systematic purging of dissenters within the Georgian Dream has left

him surrounded by a compliant cadre of “yes-men” incapable of resisting even the most radical decisions.

Breaking the Will

The November–December protests have revealed the Georgian Dream’s determination to crush dissent through unprecedented violence and injustice. In just the first ten days, almost 500 [protesters](#) have been detained, with more than 80% reportedly subjected to inhumane treatment. Up to a dozen protesters face criminal charges. Information recently [circulated](#) that the law enforcers have a list of 50 persons, which must be neutralized, involving youth activists, social media activists, and journalists.

Peaceful demonstrators have faced tear gas, water cannons, and violent beatings, often before rallies could even gather momentum. The involvement of masked and unidentified men in black, operating alongside riot police, has [escalated](#) the brutality. These individuals, without insignias or accountability, have used excessive force against protesters, creating an atmosphere of fear and impunity.

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The strategy of the Georgian Dream appears to be a brutal suppression of the journalists and “decapitating” the protests through arresting political opponents. Journalists of Formula TV, TV Pirveli and Mtavari have been [assaulted](#) by the police force while being live. Party offices of Ahali and UNM have been [raided](#). Ahali’s leader, Nika Gvaramia, was detained and [sentenced](#) to 12 days in prison. Strong Georgia’s Aleko Elisashvili was put in a two-month pre-trial detention, facing a charge of

3 years. Other political leaders have been detained administratively and severely beaten on camera. It appears that the riot police and GD-affiliated “titushki” are seeking out recognizable prominent protesters to physically assault them.

Detainees have [reported](#) severe abuse, including beatings in police vans and detention centers, with injuries ranging from facial trauma to broken ribs. Some, like Formula’s TV Anchor Guram Rogava, miraculously survived death (in his case, by broken neck). Many have endured verbal abuse and humiliation, such as being forced to praise the riot police chief or sign falsified statements under duress.

The youth have emerged as a defining force in these protests, displaying remarkable creativity and resolve. Equipped with gas masks and innovative tactics like tracking police movements and neutralizing tear gas canisters, they have shown resilience despite facing particularly harsh treatment. Reports detail how detained young protesters were mocked, doused with water in freezing conditions, and brutally beaten. Many were subjected to “corridors” of officers who inflicted relentless physical abuse, leaving victims with severe physical and psychological scars.

Remarkably, despite these crackdowns, the protests have proliferated across the country. Demonstrations have been reported in at least 40 regions, transforming this movement into a truly nationwide resistance. What began as localized outrage in Tbilisi has become a popular uprising, hitting the streets of Batumi, Telavi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Khashuri, and other regional centers.

Two Pillars of Power

The Georgian Dream government has increasingly relied on brute force as a primary tool to suppress dissent and maintain control over the protests. Riot police and special units have deployed exces-

sive force to disperse demonstrators. Unidentified groups of masked men, often referred to as “titushki”, operate alongside law enforcement, escalating the violence with impunity.

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This reliance on force serves a dual purpose: to intimidate the broader public into silence and to project an image of absolute control. The targeting of peaceful protesters, journalists, and even bystanders demonstrates an indiscriminate approach aimed at creating a climate of fear. The absence of accountability—evidenced by the lack of charges or disciplinary action against perpetrators—emboldens law enforcement to continue these practices. In many cases, Police have stood nearby, not intervening, as peaceful demonstrators were brutally beaten up. This brute force is not limited to street-level violence but extends to legal and administrative measures, such as arbitrary detentions, fabricated charges, and the weaponization of laws to constrain civil society and media freedom.

Propaganda has emerged as the second pillar of Georgian Dream’s power, effectively complementing its use of brute force. A network of pro-government media outlets, including Imedi TV, PosTV, Rustavi 2, and the Georgian Public Broadcaster, has played a critical role in shaping public perception of the protests and opposition movements. These outlets present a heavily skewed narrative, portraying protesters as violent provocateurs, foreign agents, or destabilizing forces acting against Georgia’s national interests. Such coverage often aligns with GD’s broader rhetoric, which frames dissent as a threat to stability and an attempt of *coup d’etat* instigated by the West.

Cracks within the System

The GD’s final push towards authoritarianism and the use of violence is not without an internal push-back, however. A growing wave of dissent within Georgia’s civil service and diplomatic corps has emerged following the decision to halt EU accession negotiations and the subsequent violence on the demonstrators. Over 400 civil servants from key governmental institutions, including the Ministry of Finance, the Ministries of Justice, Education and Defense, and the National Bank, issued a statement [condemning](#) this decision. They emphasized their dedication to Georgia’s European aspirations and criticized the government’s use of force against peaceful protesters. Universities have [suspended](#) lectures and joined the protests, with even the Ivanishvili-owned Kutaisi International University students [protesting](#).

Similarly, over 240 diplomats from the Foreign Ministry issued a joint statement highlighting the geopolitical risks of abandoning the EU accession process. They warned that this decision contradicts Georgia’s strategic interests and constitutional obligations under Article 78, which enshrines the country’s European aspirations. Georgian [Ambassadors](#) to Bulgaria, Czechia, Netherlands, and Italy resigned, and few others made public statements condemning the reversal of the European course.

More importantly, the dissent seems to be brewing in the law-enforcement agencies as well. Only one high-profile [resignation](#) (head of the operative planning unit of the special tasks department) has occurred so far, but reports have suggested that the riot police and law-enforcement officers are not enjoying the role of *punishers*.

Remarkably, no cracks have yet occurred within the Georgian Dream party or political system. Even though rumors emerged that the former Prime Minister and nominally the current party

leader, Irakli Gharibashvili, was planning to leave the party and the country, he [issued](#) a statement rebuking such a possibility.

The Role and Limitations of Sanctions

Sanctions against the Georgian Dream government, its leadership, and individuals responsible for political violence can play a crucial but only a partial role in addressing Georgia's deepening authoritarianism. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have already demonstrated this by [imposing](#) unilateral sanctions on key figures linked to GD and its patron, Bidzina Ivanishvili. These actions set a precedent that other EU member states could follow, using bilateral mechanisms to target those directly involved in state capture and human rights abuses.

The EU and the US could take these measures further by adopting a *Magnitsky*-style sanctions regime, freezing assets, and banning travel for Ivanishvili, his inner circle, and those implicated in the violence against protesters. Additionally, the EU could consider partially suspending Georgia's visa-free travel agreement, a move that would signal strong disapproval of the regime while directly impacting public sentiment. However, these sanctions must be carefully calibrated to avoid harming ordinary Georgians, whose European aspirations remain intact despite GD's betrayal of their interests.

Sanctions alone are unlikely to make the GD government reverse its authoritarian trajectory or return to a pro-European course. Their primary purpose should be to exacerbate internal fractures within the GD system and increase public dissatisfaction with the ruling party. Targeted measures could deepen divisions between Ivanishvili's allies and the broader GD apparatus, as individuals facing sanctions may begin questioning their loyalty. The growing unpopularity of the regime, fueled by

its increasing isolation and economic stagnation, could ultimately weaken its grip on power.

The international community must also take complementary steps beyond sanctions. The EU and the U.S. should refuse to recognize the legitimacy of GD's government, call for new elections, and amplify support for Georgia's civil society, independent media, and opposition parties. In an environment where opposition parties are starved of resources—especially as their boycott of Parliament cuts off state funding amounting to 20 million GEL—external assistance becomes essential. Traditional hesitations about directly supporting political parties due to Georgian laws must be set aside in light of the existential threat posed by GD's authoritarian consolidation. Without such aid, opposition forces risk irrelevance and collapse.

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Ultimately, sanctions and international support should promote democratic resilience, empower citizens and opposition groups, and undermine GD's monopoly on power. While these measures may not force immediate changes in policy, they can create cracks in the regime, foster dissent within its ranks, and embolden the population to demand democratic reforms and a return to the European path.

Mortal Combat for Georgia's Future

The confrontation unfolding in Georgia is nothing short of a zero-sum battle for the country's future. The stakes are clear: either Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream solidify their grip on power,

dismantling all vestiges of democracy, or the resistance forces successfully force new elections and reclaim the nation's European trajectory. There is no middle ground, no room for compromise. In this mortal contest, there will be a definitive loser—either Ivanishvili or the Georgian people.

If Georgian Dream prevails, the country will plunge into full authoritarianism. Civil society, independent media, and opposition parties will be systematically crushed. Activists, journalists, and political leaders will face relentless persecution—detained, exiled, or silenced through coercion and violence. With no organized resistance left, Ivanishvili will preside over a nation devoid of its democratic institutions, where fear replaces freedom, and the European dream is relegated to history. Such a victory for GD would not just betray the will of the Georgian people; it would also be a dramatic setback for democratic West.

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On the other hand, should the resistance succeed, Ivanishvili will be forced to concede to new elections. This outcome would represent a critical turning point for Georgia, as it seeks to break free from the stranglehold of one-man rule. New

elections, if held under fair and transparent conditions, would offer a chance to restore democratic institutions, reinvigorate civil society, and reaffirm Georgia's European aspirations. Yet even this path will come with significant challenges, as the damage inflicted by GD's rule will require years of concerted effort to repair.

The fight is existential for both sides. For Ivanishvili, a loss would mean the collapse of his power structure and exposure to accountability, both at home and abroad. For the Georgian people, a failure to resist would mean the death of their democracy and the erasure of their voices in shaping the nation's destiny. The outcome of this confrontation will define not only Georgia's immediate future but its place in the world for generations to come.

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In this mortal combat, neutrality is not an option. The international community, as well as Georgia's allies in Europe and the United States, must recognize the urgency of this moment. Supporting the forces of resistance—civil society, media, and opposition parties—is essential. The stakes are nothing less than the survival of Georgian democracy. If the Georgian people lose, they lose everything. But if Ivanishvili loses, Georgia may yet reclaim its rightful path toward a free and democratic future ■