

Georgia's Fractured Friendship with Ukraine

In the long “thank you” list that the Georgian Prime Minister read on December 15, 2023, when Georgia obtained the EU candidate status, there was no mention of Ukraine or its people. Yet it was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or rather a courageous resistance of the Ukrainians, that played a pivotal role in thrusting the enlargement issue back onto the European agenda.

Profound antipathy harbored towards Ukraine by the current Georgian leadership dates back to the first years of the Georgian Dream (GD) in power, undermining the almost twenty-year-long strategic partnership between Kyiv and Tbilisi from the early days of independence. To-

day, neither Ukraine nor Georgia maintains an ambassadorial presence in each other's capitals. President Zelenskyy personally [demanded](#) the departure of Georgia's ambassador in July 2023.

Post-independence Strategic Alliance

Ukraine, or more precisely, the concept of an independent and pro-Western Ukraine, has consistently discovered an ally in Georgia. Ukrainian volunteers displayed remarkable valor in their struggle against Russian and pro-Russian forces during the Abkhazian War of 1992-1993, and their acts of bravery are now an integral part of the collective memory of the Abkhaz conflict.



Thorniké Gordadze
Contributor

Thorniké Gordadze, a Franco - Georgian academic and former State Minister for European and Euro - Atlantic Integration in Georgia (2010 - 12), served as the Chief Negotiator for Georgia on the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. From 2014 to 2020, he led the Research and Studies Department at the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies in Paris. A Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 2021 to 2022, he currently teaches at SciencesPo in Paris and is an Eastern Neighbourhood and Black Sea program fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute. Gordadze, also a Researcher at Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Paris SciencesPo (2005).

A substantial level of cooperation and strategic partnership was achieved during the 1990s under the leadership of Presidents Leonid Kuchma and Eduard Shevardnadze. It was during this period that the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) organization, comprising four post-Soviet states with an ambition to counter Russia's influence, was established.

Under President Mikheil Saakashvili's administration (2004-2012), Georgian-Ukrainian relations reached new heights. Many Georgians actively participated in Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004, following the color revolution in Georgia in November 2003. The leadership of both countries exhibited a complete mutual understanding and shared positions on crucial matters such as Russia, the European Union, and NATO, and the fundamental principles of international law, particularly the principle of upholding the territorial integrity of states within their internationally recognized borders. This extraordinary closeness was epitomized by the baptismal ties between Saakashvili and Ukraine's President Viktor Yushchenko, with the latter becoming the godfather of Saakashvili's youngest son.

Consequently, both nations faced escalating tensions with Moscow, including Kremlin-led destabilization attempts and trade and energy embargoes. Despite the Orange Revolutionaries' defeat in the 2010

elections and the ascendance of Viktor Yanukovich, a former regional leader in Donbas with close Moscow ties, Georgia made efforts to maintain positive relations with Kyiv. This was especially pertinent since Ukraine ostensibly continued to assert its official commitment to European integration as its ultimate foreign policy objective. Furthermore, Yanukovich did not blindly adhere to Moscow's policies towards Tbilisi, notably by maintaining support for the territorial integrity of Georgia.

From Friends to Foes

The transformation from friends to foes began in 2012 with the rise of the "Georgian Dream" led by Bidzina Ivanishvili in Tbilisi, coinciding with Ukraine's second popular revolution known as "Euro-Maidan," which ousted the pro-Russian oligarchy in Ukraine, ushering in pro-Western forces determined to reestablish ties with the EU and NATO. These divergent political shifts sowed the initial seeds of discord.

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The Georgian Dream government did not endorse the Euro-Maidan revolution as it unfolded; in fact, it exhibited sympathies toward Yanukovich. Notably, former Dynamo Kyiv player Kakha Kaladze, one of



the Georgian Dream founding leaders and now a mayor of Tbilisi, downplayed the revolutionary mood of Ukrainians, notoriously [claiming](#) that events in Kyiv had no massive character and were “confined to the Hrushchevski Street.”

In contrast to the Government, the Georgian opposition viewed Ukraine’s pro-European victory as an opportunity to transfer the anti-Putin resistance from Tbilisi to Kyiv. With Georgian new leadership propagating dialogue with Moscow, Kyiv seemed an obvious choice for countering Russian influence in the wider neighborhood.

In addition, the Georgian opposition also fancied the idea that the pro-Russian government could be ousted through a peaceful revolution, something that had already been done in 2003. As the Georgian Dream tightened its hold on power, demonstrations in Tbilisi protesting the Government’s actions and decisions acquired a regular character. Conversely, the Georgian Dream dubbed all opposition parties as radical and blamed them for planning a coup d’état. Thus, Ukraine, as a model for power change, became just as unacceptable for the Georgian Dream as the color revolutions, in general, became for Putin.

Ukraine’s new government sought rapid anti-corruption reforms, and Georgia, with a track record of successful reforms

in 2004–2012, provided Ukraine with a pool of experienced former civil servants, officials, and politicians, many of whom left the state service (and even had to flee the country) after the Georgian Dream’s initial cleansing of the state apparatus from the sympathizers of “the previous bloody regime.” This influx of Georgians to Ukraine culminated in the naturalization and appointment of former Georgian President Saakashvili as governor of the Odesa region.

Ivanishvili’s Georgia did not offer significant political, military, or financial support to Ukraine during Russia’s annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014. While Tbilisi officially backed Ukraine’s territorial integrity, signs of divergence in the political agendas became evident immediately. Prime Minister Gharibashvili’s 2014 BBC [interview](#) underscored this shift when he explicitly separated Georgia from Ukraine, emphasizing that Ukraine’s problems with Russia were distinct from Georgia’s. Gharibashvili stated that Georgia engaged in dialogue with Russia and expected it to yield results. This shift had adverse consequences, as the EU began using Georgia as a precedent to pressure Ukraine into finding common ground with Putin despite Crimea’s annexation and invasion of Donbas.

Saakashvili’s resignation as governor of Odesa, his rift with President Petro Poros-

henko, and his subsequent departure from Ukraine to the EU did not mend relations between the Georgian and Ukrainian governments. This indicated that the deterioration was more profound and extended beyond symbolic personalities.

After Volodymyr Zelenskyy came to power in 2019, many in Georgia believed that he would reengage with Russia and Georgia, but the reality proved to be different. Zelenskyy rehabilitated Saakashvili, [restored](#) his Ukrainian citizenship, and [appointed](#) him to an official position as the head of the National Reform Coordination Office. For the Georgian Dream, therefore, nothing changed, and the policy of no high-level contacts and visits was maintained. Moreover, Zelenskyy proved to be anti-Russian, not the type of friend Ivanishvili and his prime ministers sought.

Saakashvili's arrest in 2021, following his spontaneous [return](#) to Georgia before the local elections, further strained Georgian-Ukrainian relations. Saakashvili's detention, mistreatment in the prison and hospital, and deterioration of health condition [gave](#) Zelenskyy an official reason to expel the Georgian ambassador in July 2023. However, the main disagreement between Kyiv and Tbilisi was yet to come.

War, Popular Support, and the Georgian Legion

After Putin invaded Ukraine in February

2022, Georgia, just like the rest of Europe, was shocked and sympathetic toward Ukraine. Georgian Dream [denounced](#) Moscow in words; however, when the West imposed sanctions, Tbilisi [refrained](#) from joining them. Later, Tbilisi opened the door to Russian immigrants fleeing first sanctions and then the military draft, and finally, in 2023, agreed to the [re-sumption](#) of flights with Moscow – in other words, reverting to business as usual. These decisions, as well as muted political support for the Zelenskyy government and refraining from criticizing Moscow, either because of fear or “quasi-rational” calculations, totally destroyed trust between Ukraine and Georgia.

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In contrast to the government's stance, the people of Georgia consistently showed strong [support](#) for Ukraine and its war effort. Few countries exhibit such robust societal backing for Ukraine as Georgia does. Notably, Tbilisi stands out globally as a city where Ukrainian flags adorn the balconies of ordinary citizens, grace shop and café windows, and countless graffiti praising Ukraine's armed forces embellish downtown walls.

Numerous private initiatives spearheaded by everyday Georgian citizens reflect this solidarity, resulting in the collection

of funds for the Ukrainian army, the dispatch of humanitarian aid, and the warm welcome extended to Ukrainian refugees. These grassroots initiatives led by thousands of Georgians far outshine the meager assistance initially provided by the Georgian government at the outset of the invasion.

Furthermore, Georgian volunteers constitute the largest foreign contingent within the Ukrainian armed forces. The renowned “Georgian Legion” is just one example, with numerous Georgian nationals serving in various other units. Many of these Georgians, often former professionals from the Georgian armed forces, have been active in Ukraine since 2014.

The Georgian government’s initiation of political purges within military and security structures, particularly among special forces personnel trained by American or NATO instructors, prompted the exodus of many soldiers from the country. Ukraine offered them refuge and fresh career opportunities. For instance, Georgian special forces officers Giorgi Kuprashvili and Bakhva Chikobava, killed in defending Mariupol, [played](#) pivotal roles in establishing the Azov battalion (later brigade) and were the first foreign instructors to operate in the Azov military camp near Kyiv in 2014.

Based on our interviews with Georgian military personnel engaged in Ukraine,

approximately 1,000 to 1,100 Georgians serve continuously under the Ukrainian flag, while the total number of Georgians who have fought against Russian forces on Ukrainian soil since February 2022 exceeds 3,000. Tragically, over 60 of them have lost their lives on various Ukrainian fronts. Despite the Georgian Dream’s stance, many Georgians regard these individuals as heroes.

Unsurprisingly, the Georgian Government has not concealed its hostility toward the Legion. In the initial weeks of the Russian aggression, it [attempted](#) to prevent charter flights of Georgian volunteers from departing Tbilisi. Additionally, the parliamentary majority contemplated stripping Georgian citizenship from anyone deciding to serve in the Ukrainian armed forces. Although the threat wasn’t ultimately put into action, several Georgian fighters faced criminal cases initiated by the authorities, and some risked arrest if they attempted to return to the country.

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This disparity in attitudes between the government and the people of Georgia has led to a stark contrast in how Ukrainian authorities approach the two. It has become increasingly common for Ukrainian

officials to express their gratitude and best wishes to the Georgian population while bypassing the country's official authorities. President Zelenskyy even [addressed](#) the Georgian crowd in Tbilisi, who gathered in solidarity with Ukraine in March 2022. In turn, the Georgian government has used such positioning of Kyiv as justification for its unsupportive stance towards Ukraine.

Explaining the Fracture

The power of the Georgian Dream (GD) rests on two key foundations: a conciliatory, even compliant approach toward Putin's Russia and the sustained exertion of pressure on domestic adversaries, including the political opposition, critical, independent media, and a substantial segment of civil society. Within this context, Ukraine represents a dual challenge and consequently poses a significant threat.

First and foremost, successful Ukrainian resistance to Russia and sustained Western support demonstrates the feasibility of standing up to Moscow. This contrasts with the domestic GD narrative that Russia is invincible and any resistance is futile - either a form of madness or a "directive" from external anti-Russian forces. This narrative aligns with the GD's interpretation of the 2008 war in Georgia - not a Russian aggression but an endeavor of Saakashvili's making. According to this narrative, one can negotiate peace

with Russia, and the existence of conflict should not prevent good people-to-people and commercial relations since the Russian market is a "natural commercial opportunity" for the Georgian economy.

Secondly, a triumphant Ukraine and a weakened Russia would substantially alter the regional balance of power, with Kyiv potentially emerging as a new regional force capable of influencing Georgia's domestic politics, likely not to the GD's advantage. Indeed, the entire Georgian opposition vests hope in Ukraine's victory. Opposition politicians regularly visit Kyiv to strengthen ties with Ukrainian authorities, and certain Ukrainian politicians openly support the Georgian opposition, such as the influential MP David Arakhamia, who is of Georgian origin.

Additionally, the issue of the Georgian Legion comes into play. The Georgian regime harbors apprehensions concerning the prestige, expertise, and combat experience of Georgian fighters, as well as the potential consequences of their return to Georgia. Above all, the government is concerned that Georgian legionnaires might be plotting a coup d'état. Leaders of the ruling party have propagated a conspiracy theory [alleging](#) collaboration between the Kyiv government, the Georgian opposition, and Georgian fighters engaged in Ukraine, all purportedly encouraged by Washington and Brussels. The overarching objective of this global conspiracy the-

ory ostensibly revolves around opening a second front against Russia and “dragging” Georgia into the war.

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Perhaps the most irritating aspect of Georgia’s conduct toward Ukraine is the indirect economic support that Tbilisi inadvertently extends to Moscow by allowing the indirect transit of sanctioned goods. As explained in the article by our editor, Georgia does not directly circumvent the sanctions. However, the goods flowing through Georgian territory to neighboring states and Central Asian countries are highly likely to end up in Russia. While the EU shares Ukraine’s concerns on this matter, its response has been less strict – just an expression of hope that Georgia continues cooperating with the EU.

Unlike the EU, Kyiv [imposed](#) sanctions on fifteen Georgian individuals, most of whom are members of the Ivanishvili family or closely associated with it. Ukraine also strives to have specific Georgian figures included on American and European sanction lists. The decision to launch direct flights from Georgia to Russia, which drew [condemnation](#) and strong criticism from the EU and the US, [prompted](#) Kyiv to add Georgian Airways, Georgia’s flagship

carrier, to its list of sanctioned airlines.

When Georgian authorities explain the deterioration of bilateral relations with Ukraine, they often downplay the issue of sanctions and instead emphasize other contentious points. These include Ukraine’s alleged desire to see Georgia embroiled in a conflict with Russia to alleviate the pressure on Ukrainian armed forces or concerns related to Saakashvili’s health. This tactic serves as an attempt to divert the discourse away from the real issue – two ideologies and approaches regarding Russia.

Anti-Ukrainian Propaganda As a Tool to Stay in Power

The Georgian Government’s communication regarding Ukraine has two primary aspects: one is aimed at reassuring Russia, while the other is focused on persuading the public that GD’s stance is the only good alternative. Relations with the EU and the West are viewed through these prisms. Moscow appreciates Tbilisi’s position regarding the conflict in Ukraine, its reluctance to support Ukraine, and its refusal to condemn Russia despite the latter’s occupation of 20% of Georgian territory. Even more significantly, Russia sees that Georgia’s position helps Russia to mitigate the impact of sanctions. Russian mouthpieces, starting with top diplomat Sergey Lavrov and ending with daily propagandists like Margarita Simonian and

Vladimir Solovev, often speak [highly](#) of the “wise stance” taken by Georgian leadership, highlighting their perceived “resistance” to the directives of Washington and Brussels.

Domestic communication of the Georgian Dream primarily evolves around the concept of peace. The Georgian Dream party strongly advocates the notion that it successfully achieved peace with Russia, in contrast to Ukraine and the former UNM government. The subliminal message implies that Zelensky and Saakashvili, whether due to recklessness or a disregard for national interests, led their countries into an unwinnable war against Russia. The distribution of images depicting human and material devastation in pro-government media aims to evoke fear of the horrors of war and cultivate an appreciation for the wisdom of the Georgian government. The emphasis on how Zelensky “sacrificed” the Ukrainians mirrors the portrayal of how Saakashvili “sacrificed” the Georgians in 2008, highlighting a contrast with how Ivanishvili has “protected” his population over the past 11 years.

To further accentuate this “success,” the government continues to propagate messages about the pressure they face from Ukraine and the West, insinuating that they were pushing Georgia towards a conflict with Russia. All of this is done without acknowledging that the ongoing war originated with Russia’s invasion and

subsequent occupation and annexation of Ukraine’s sovereign territories. Members of the ruling party, the mayor of Tbilisi, and even former Prime Minister himself nurture the notion that the West is punishing Georgia and its unofficial leader, Ivanishvili, because of their refusal to engage in war. Thus, if Georgia’s EU candidate status was delayed, it was because of Tbilisi’s refusal to comply with Brussels’ demands and escalate tensions with Moscow, whereas Ukraine was granted candidate status as compensation for the conflict with Russia.

Due to the widespread pro-Ukrainian sentiments among the Georgian population and the fact that copying Russian narratives about “Ukrainian Nazi LGBTs” is not credible in Georgia, the government is unable to engage in anti-Ukrainian propaganda directly. Nevertheless, they are discrediting Ukraine and its leadership through indirect means. While the mainstream of the Georgian Dream engages in subtle and complex criticism of Ukraine and the West, the satellite groups that have been created and nurtured by GD are more straightforward and unambiguous in their attacks, openly expressing support for Russia’s success.

Entities like the PosTV network, the People’s Power party, Alt-Info, and other various far-right and extremist groups closely affiliated with GD are less concerned with subtlety and diplomatic language. It’s a

well-established GD strategy to ensure its message reaches the public through these alternative groups. For example, the “foreign agents bill” was introduced into Parliament by the People’s Power party but received votes from all GD MPs.

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Therefore, it is not accidental that Georgia turned its back on Ukraine. The primacy of maintaining power dictates the actions of the Georgian Dream and its leadership. Whether because of the fear of Russia, disbelief that Ukraine can really win the war, or strategic geopolitical calculations, one thing is clear – the Government of Georgia chose sides in the Russia-Ukraine war, and it is not the side of the West, EU, and Kyiv. ■