

# Assad's Downfall: A Lesson for Georgia

**T**he international community was caught off guard by the sudden collapse of regional strongman Bashar Al Assad's regime in Syria. In less than ten days, the Assad family's 53-year reign over Syria came to an end. The fall of one of the most brutal dictatorial regimes demonstrates that ["no darkness lasts forever"](#) and the end of seemingly strong rulers can arrive unexpectedly when it is least expected. Understanding the reasons behind the collapse of the Assad family's half-century of oppressive rule is important, not only for examining regional dynamics and global security processes but also for drawing lessons relevant to people challenging autocratic regimes even in far-flung places.

From Tbilisi's perspective, the events unfolding in the Middle East are seen as distant developments that, while important, are less relevant to Georgia. However, in reality, the lessons from the Syrian

leader's fall are relevant as thousands of Georgians stand up to an oligarchic regime that is transforming the country into a Russian-style autocracy.

## Collapse Without a Warning

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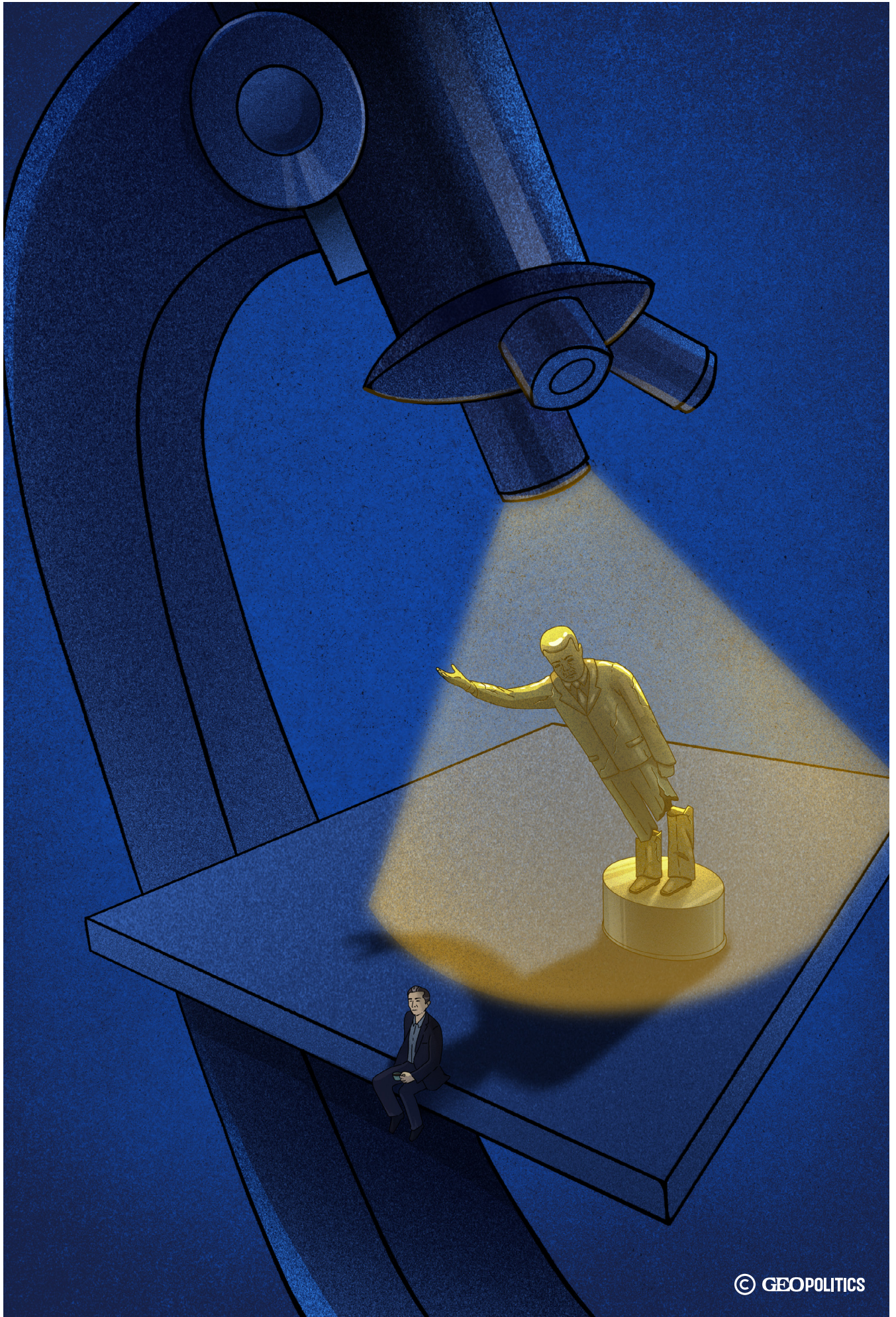
The key lesson from the Syrian case is that authoritarian regimes collapse unexpectedly, even when they seem invincible. For years, Assad's hold on power appeared secure, yet his regime [collapsed](#) within days of a coordinated rebel offensive. Such regimes invest excessive resources to foster an illusion of invincibility, effectively concealing their internal vulnerabilities. However, this façade of strength can quickly dissolve when a crisis occurs,



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even amid external efforts to support the regime.

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Bashar Al-Assad's final hours in power reveal much about how authoritarian regimes cultivate a façade of stability. President Assad [kept everyone](#), including his relatives and closest allies, in the dark about his intentions to leave Syria. Hours before fleeing to Moscow, Assad assured a gathering of around 30 army and security chiefs at the defense ministry that Russian military support was forthcoming and [urged](#) ground forces to maintain their position. He did not even inform his younger brother, Maher, the commander of the Army's elite 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, as well as his cousins Ehab and Eyad Makhoulf who were killed while attempting to flee to Lebanon. He abandoned his closest associates and relatives, leaving them to face their own fate. Accounts from anonymous representatives of Assad's inner circle paint a vivid picture of his final hours, during which the Syrian president chose to uphold the illusion of stability at the expense of the lives of his closest associates. This serves as a stark reminder of how the pursuit of an illusory sense of stability and power can ultimately come at the expense of those who remain loyal to the regime.

Although there is no direct comparison between Assad's brutal dictatorship and the authoritarian regime in Georgia, recent developments in Syria offer valuable lessons that merit consideration. Notably, the Georgian authorities' disproportionate use of force against peaceful protesters is nothing more than a weakened and delegitimized

regime's attempt to project an illusion of invincibility. Reliance on sheer force and brutal intimidation tactics against political opponents merely mask internal vulnerabilities which reflect weakness rather than strength. Much like in Syria, the Georgian regime invests excessive resources to project a sense of stability, thereby masking the cracks in its crumbling system.

Therefore, this carefully cultivated façade of invincibility may collapse even more abruptly than expected. More importantly, regime loyalists should not be surprised if they learn of their leader's sudden departure from the news, much like Assad's supporters, who were left to face their unexpected fate.

## Can't Trust Russia

Another important lesson is the shifting power dynamics extending well beyond Syria with significant regional and global repercussions. Notably, the inability to salvage Assad's regime, even with a substantial military presence, highlights Moscow's diminished standing in the region. In 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin deployed troops to Syria at Bashar al-Assad's request with a clear objective: to reaffirm Russia's status as a global power capable of counterbalancing the United States in the region, to bolster Moscow's influence in the Middle East, where its presence had diminished following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to escape the international isolation it [endured](#) following its annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, these gains seem to unravel following the swift collapse of the Assad regime. The failure to salvage a longstanding ally has revealed the limitations of Russia's security promises in the region and globally.

More importantly, Moscow's failure to maintain a loyal regime in a country where it has longstanding strategic interests—such as access to the Mediterranean Sea and crucial military bases—highlights how the conflict in Ukraine has weakened Russia

both militarily and politically. The degree to which the conflict in Ukraine has absorbed Moscow's military and political resources illustrates that, aside from Ukraine, Russia's other foreign policy objectives have been [consigned to secondary status](#). Hence, Moscow's strained financial, human, and military resources, combined with an unprecedented sanctions regime, significantly reduce the likelihood of Russia's military involvement in other theaters.

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This is a crucial factor from a Georgian standpoint as the ruling regime's propaganda heavily relies on fueling fears of war with Russia. Exploiting the threat of conflict has become a central narrative for the government, striking a chord in a society still grappling with the lasting scars of Russian military aggression. The shadowy notion of a "global war party," allegedly pushing for confrontation with Russia, has become a defining feature of the current Georgian leadership's rhetoric. "Either you fight Russia, or we will punish you" – this is the blunt message that Georgia and its people receive from the so-called "global war party", according to the the Georgian Dream (GD)'s [statement](#) of 8 January. Despite the blatant absurdity of this narrative, it has proven remarkably persistent and difficult to counter. Meanwhile, Moscow's failure to prop up the Assad regime underscores its limited military capacity while deeply entangled in the war in Ukraine. Simply put, Russia cannot sustain operations on multiple fronts. Even more humiliating for the Kremlin is its growing reliance on junior partners like Tehran and Pyongyang to sustain its campaign in Ukraine.

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Moreover, the conflict in Syria has always been less about Syria itself and more about revisionist actors seeking to undermine US interests. President Putin's strategic defeat in this theater can thus be interpreted as a clear indicator of Moscow's weakened geopolitical standing—a factor that could significantly influence the political landscape in Georgia.

## Ankara On the Rise

Another important aspect of the Syrian leader's fall, particularly relevant from a Georgian perspective, is the rising influence of Türkiye. The fall of Assad's regime signifies more than just a regime change in Syria—it marks a profound shift in the distribution of power among regional actors. Gone are the days when Iran and Russia stood triumphant, bolstering Assad's regime to quash insurgencies. The events of December 2024 reflect a new regional landscape, where the influence of the aggressive revisionist powers—Tehran and Moscow—has notably diminished. Ankara emerges with a significantly strengthened regional stance in this evolving power dynamic. This shift also suggests a broader reconfiguration of power balance in the Middle East, with revisionist players finding their roles increasingly challenged.

A decade ago, Ankara's attempts to support insurgents and push for regime change in Syria resulted in Türkiye's regional isolation and strained its ties with Washington. Years of Ankara's efforts to boost its influence by mending relations with regional actors, known as the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, quickly dwindled. The extent of regional isolation prompted Ibrahim Kalin, who was then Erdoğan's chief policy adviser, to label

Ankara's support for the Islamist cause and the Syrian opposition as a [foreign policy of "precious loneliness."](#) However, with Assad's regional allies weakened by Israel's actions in Gaza and Lebanon and Russia preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, Erdoğan seized the opportunity to change the tide and bolster Türkiye's position in Syria. Today, with Assad no longer in power, the balance has swiftly tipped in Erdoğan's favor. This shift has established a new trend in the region, with Ankara actively working to reduce Moscow's influence across the wider region, firstly, by securing Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh and now, in Syria, by undermining Russia's closest ally. More importantly, Assad's fall presents Ankara with a unique opportunity for reconciliation with Washington as the differing interests in Syria have long been a significant obstacle in their bilateral relations. Whether Ankara and Washington can seize the emerging opportunities will become apparent in the weeks and months ahead.

This shift significantly impacts Georgia's domestic political landscape. In recent years, the domestic political struggle in Georgia has increasingly revolved around the geopolitical choices of key stakeholders. The ruling party has been widely perceived as a political force undermining Georgia's European agenda, subtly aligning itself with the interests of revisionist actors. The Media Development Foundation's (MDF) report clearly illustrates this trend, thoroughly examining the ruling party's anti-Western discourse [during the pre-2024 election campaign.](#)

The increasing influence of Türkiye may have a significant impact in this context. Notably, the rise of Ankara's influence comes at the expense of

the region's diminishing geopolitical standing of key revisionist actors—Moscow and Tehran. Assad's fall has opened the door to a new reality in US-Türkiye bilateral relations which could significantly alter the regional dynamics. The potential rapprochement between Ankara and Washington, coupled with the waning influence of Tehran and Moscow, threatens the core premise of the Georgian regime's anti-Western propaganda which centers on the notion of Western decline in favor of newly emerging power centers. Developments in Syria illustrate a diametrically different reality that, for the time being, seems less appealing to emerging autocratic regimes.

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From this perspective, the abrupt fall of Assad's regime ushers in new realities for the region, sending shock waves far beyond the Middle East and significantly impacting political dynamics in distant places, including Georgia. The shifts in the regional balance of power, marked by the decline of revisionist actors and the strengthening of Ankara's geopolitical standing, alongside the exposure of inherent weaknesses within autocratic regimes, offer important lessons to reflect on. While Syria may appear distant in the Georgian context, recent developments may be more relevant than conventional wisdom suggests. The shadow of dethroned Assad stretches far beyond Syria, casting a long and ominous silhouette over Ivanishvili and his oligarchic authoritarian regime, a stark reminder of where blind loyalty to Moscow can lead ■