

Is Russia Behind Georgia's Geopolitical Realignment?

Few things provoke Georgians more than a direct affront to their European aspirations. Yet, this is precisely what the self-proclaimed Georgian Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, delivered on 28 November 2024. In an unprecedented move for a candidate country, he [officially](#) announced Georgia's withdrawal from EU accession talks, declaring a "time-out" until 2028. Kobakhidze characterized the EU's conditionality as 'blackmail,' asserting that Georgia has had enough of it. He claimed that his government was no longer willing to be under constant EU pressure, indirectly admitting that the accession requirements represented an unwelcome irritant for a ruling party preoccupied with consolidating power and altering the country's foreign policy trajectory. Unsurprisingly, the streets of Georgia erupted in [protest](#), exacerbating an ongoing political and constitutional crisis that had been simmering since the contested parliamentary elections in October. Equally predict-

ably, both domestic and international observers began speculating about potential Russian influence. Why would a ruling party, already facing the test of legitimacy, an outraged electorate, and a plummeting reputation, take a step almost sure to backfire—unless prompted by external forces?

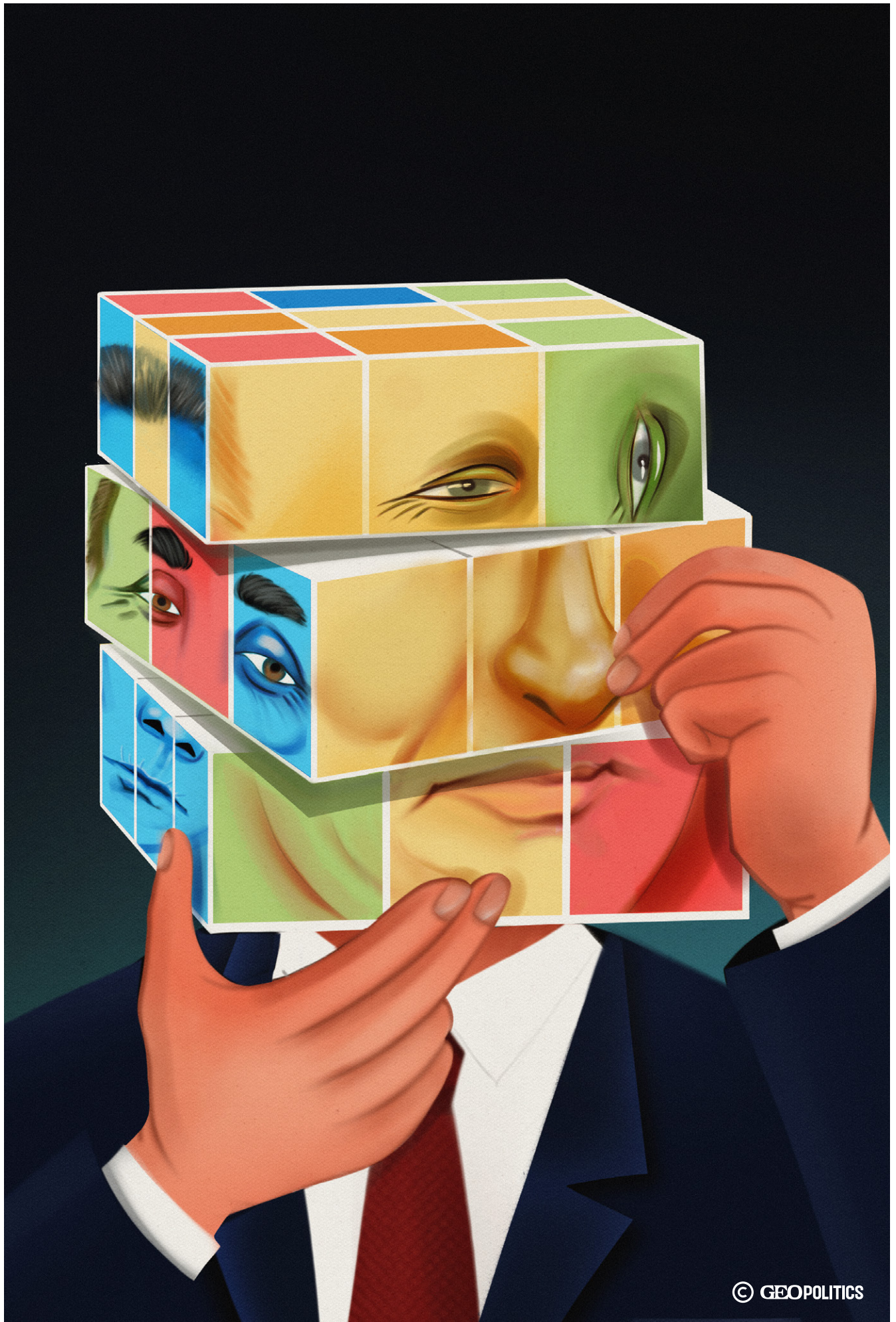
Russian and GD officials have presented a unified front, advancing the familiar narrative of a Western-backed regime change.

Suspiciousness has grown as Moscow openly voiced support for the Georgian Dream (GD), echoing Tbilisi's claims that ongoing protests are an externally orchestrated insurgency against a democratically elected government. Russian and GD officials have presented a unified front, advancing the familiar narrative of a Western-backed regime change. Georgia's president has repeatedly point-



NATALIE SABANADZE
Guest Contributor

Ambassador Natalie Sabanadze has been a Cyrus Vance Visiting Professor in International Relations at Mount Holyoke College between 2021–23. Prior to this, she served as head of the Georgian mission to the EU and ambassador plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Belgium and Grand Duchy of Luxembourg since 2013. From 2005–13, she worked as a senior official at the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in The Hague, where she held several positions including head of Central and South East Europe section and later, head of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia section. She holds an MSc in International Relations from London School of Economics and D.Phil in Politics and International Relations from Oxford University. Natalie Sabanadze has published and lectured extensively on post-communist transition, nationalism and ethnic conflict, Russian foreign policy, and the EU in the world.



© GEOPOLITICS

ed to Russian interference, describing the October parliamentary elections as a [“Russian hybrid operation.”](#) While some in Western policy circles share her assessment, others remain skeptical. Despite widespread speculation and allegations of behind-the-scenes Russian interference, no concrete evidence on the scale seen in Moldova or Romania has surfaced in Georgia. Longtime Georgia observer, Thomas de Waal, for instance, [suggested](#) that *“It’s a business relationship—there’s no diplomatic relationship. Things are going on behind the scenes, but they’re more afraid of Russia than wanting to join Russia.”* Similarly, Neil MacFarlane has [argued](#) that the GD and its founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, are driven more by personal interests than Moscow’s. *“Ivanishvili is neither pro-Russian nor pro-Western,”* MacFarlane noted. *“He is pro-Ivanishvili.”*

Nonetheless, questions linger about the nature and extent of Ivanishvili’s ties to Russia. Is Moscow the driving force behind Georgia’s shift toward anti-Western authoritarianism or is this transformation an entirely homegrown phenomenon? Are we attributing undue influence to Russia, inadvertently amplifying its reach while overlooking the agency of local actors? And to what extent, if any, have Western policies contributed to the current crisis?

The nature of Russia’s influence projection in Georgia and beyond can best be understood through three interconnected factors: domestic proxies, external enablers, and a perceived lack of Western resolve.

Those seeking direct material evidence of Russian interference in Georgian politics—such as Kremlin-issued instructions, widespread vote-buying schemes during elections, or large-scale social media operations—will be disappointed. The nature of Russia’s influence projection in Georgia and beyond can best be understood through three

interconnected factors: domestic proxies, external enablers, and a perceived lack of Western resolve. Russia skillfully exploits the interplay of these elements in each specific context to undermine Western interests. Examining these factors in the case of Georgia helps uncover Russia’s hidden trail and offers insights into the mechanisms of Russian influence projection more broadly.

The Georgian Dream as a Russian Asset

Russia’s influence operations abroad are typically covert rather than overt, characterized by several replicable strategies. These include reliance on domestic actors—whether in government or opposition, acting as Russia’s proxies; a strong informational and ideological presence in local media, often amplified by Russia-affiliated outlets and social media networks; and the provision of direct or indirect economic incentives. Acting as a Russian proxy does not negate the agency of local actors. On the contrary, Russia values them precisely because of their agency which can be leveraged to advance Moscow’s strategic interests. This dynamic makes them valuable partners, particularly when their domestic political ambitions align with broader Russian objectives.

In the case of Georgia, Russia historically relied on economic, military, and diplomatic pressure to maintain influence, as none of Georgia’s governments aligned with Moscow, and pro-Russian political forces remained too marginal to merit significant investment. Following the 2008 war, Georgia severed diplomatic ties with Russia, withdrew from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and committed itself to European and Euro-Atlantic integration. At the time, strong pro-Western and anti-Russian public sentiment made Georgia appear to be a lost cause for Moscow. However, the situation has changed drastically in recent years as the Georgian Dream emerged

as Russia's most valuable asset in the South Caucasus. The alignment of the GD's domestic agenda with Russian geopolitical interests has allowed Moscow to exert influence and make geopolitical gains that took many by surprise.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked the beginning of Georgia's geopolitical U-turn. Motivated by either personal fears of Russia or a growing sense of rejection by the West, Bidzina Ivanishvili began to view the Western—particularly European—democratization agenda as unwelcome interference in domestic affairs, directly conflicting with his desire to maintain power. What began as “restrained neutrality” in the war escalated into a near-total breakdown of relations with the West. Simultaneously, the regime survival agenda became increasingly aligned with Russia's interests, favoring Georgia's distancing from the West and returning to Moscow's sphere of influence. To rephrase Neil MacFarlane, being “pro-Ivanishvili” became indistinguishable from being “pro-Russian.”

This alignment with Russia began with the Georgian Dream's ideological shift from center-left to far-right, adopting Russian narratives of sovereign democracy, traditional values, anti-liberalism, and anti-LGBTQ populism. Leveraging its parliamentary supermajority, the GD enacted Russian-style laws on foreign influence, LGBTQ propaganda, and public protests, dismissing criticism from Brussels as [Soviet-style colonialism](#). Concurrently, Georgia restored economic and energy dependence on Russia, reinstating leverage Moscow had lost since 2008. Georgia's foreign policy alignment with the European Union sharply dropped, replaced by increasing alignment with Russia. To further consolidate power, Ivanishvili [threatened](#) to outlaw pro-Western opposition parties and prosecute their members. Emulating Putin's playbook, he established a “constructive” opposition in the form of the GD's ultra-right-wing People's Power faction, appointing one of its leaders as Georgia's president. With the presidential inauguration on

29 December, the GD effectively completed its capture of all state institutions, bolstered by robust information campaigns through party-affiliated media outlets.

As Russia's uncontested dominance in the South Caucasus has waned due to Azerbaijan's restoration of territorial integrity, Türkiye's growing influence, and Armenia's gradual distancing from Moscow, Georgia's geopolitical transformation under the GD has become Russia's most significant gain, partially offsetting these relative losses.

Russia has little need to seek alternative proxies in Georgia or allocate additional resources to project influence. The Georgian Dream remains the most significant, well-resourced, and popular political party, effectively controlling the country while steering it toward Russia's orbit. As Russia's uncontested dominance in the South Caucasus has waned due to Azerbaijan's restoration of territorial integrity, Türkiye's growing influence, and Armenia's gradual distancing from Moscow, Georgia's geopolitical transformation under the GD has become Russia's most significant gain, partially offsetting these relative losses. If the GD retains power, Georgia can become Russia's principal aid in its efforts to push Western influence out of the region.

External Enablers: The Role of Hungary

Hungary has served as one of the enablers for Russia's success in Georgia. In a country where support for European integration remains consistently high and pro-Russian sentiments are nearly nonexistent, adopting an overtly pro-Russian stance would amount to political suicide. To

navigate this, the Georgian Dream maintained a democratic façade and prioritized European integration—at least rhetorically—until after the elections. To bolster this image, the GD needed visible allies within Europe who could lobby for its EU accession and demonstrate that its anti-liberal, conservative agenda was still compatible with European values. Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, provided exactly what was needed.

For the Georgian Dream, Hungary has served as both an example and an alibi for its growing ideological and geopolitical alignment with Russia.

When Hungary enacts Russian-style legislation—such as laws on transparency of foreign influence or restrictions on LGBTQ rights—it provides a blueprint for other governments with autocratic tendencies but pro-European populations to emulate and justify. For the Georgian Dream, Hungary has served as both an example and an alibi for its growing ideological and geopolitical alignment with Russia. Moreover, Orbán [blocked](#) EU sanctions against the GD and provided diplomatic support, allowing the GD to operate as a de facto Russian proxy with minimal repercussions both domestically and internationally.

The relationship between the Georgian Dream and Viktor Orbán has not been one-sided but rather mutually beneficial, making Georgia one of Orbán's notable foreign policy successes. While Hungary has shielded Georgia from international criticism for its democratic backsliding and drift toward Russia, Orbán has gained from the proliferation of like-minded regimes in Europe's neighborhood. This dynamic has bolstered his reputation as a leading champion of European anti-liberalism and populist conservatism. Furthermore, Orbán has positioned himself as the only European leader

actively engaging with and influencing the GD. In a striking [show of solidarity](#), he traveled to Tbilisi after the elections, even as other EU partners refused to recognize the legitimacy of the vote. Against the background of widespread hesitancy to recognize the outcome of the October elections, his visit only highlighted the increasingly isolated position of Tbilisi, making it particularly susceptible to Russian influence.

Whether intentional or not, Hungary has served as an effective conduit for advancing Russia's interests both within the EU and in Georgia.

Whether intentional or not, Hungary has served as an effective conduit for advancing Russia's interests both within the EU and in Georgia. Hungary has repeatedly undermined European solidarity and unity with respect to both Ukraine and Georgia while exemplifying how a country can remain part of the institutional West yet pursue anti-Western policies. It has aided the Georgian Dream in dismantling Georgian democracy and, by doing so, delivered an invaluable gift to Vladimir Putin. Russia understands that Georgia's primary strategic value lies in its potential as a European-style liberal democracy in a frontline region where competition for resources, political influence, and control over connectivity infrastructure is intensifying. For the West, Georgia's importance is not solely derived from its strategic location or connectivity potential—which are not unmatched—but from its capacity to develop into an institutional democracy that can resist Kremlin influence and serve as a model for other countries in the region. Georgia's backsliding from a democracy into a Russian-style autocracy under the GD is eroding this strategic value. Isolated from the West and devoid of its democratic appeal, Georgia risks becoming easy prey for regional hegemons.

International Context and Western Resolve

The policies of the Georgian Dream and the accompanying rhetoric represent more than a quiet choice in favor of Russia; they are an open challenge to the West. This makes the GD a particularly valuable asset for Russia which is fighting not only to subjugate Ukraine but also to redefine the parameters of the new world order. Putin was quick to note with satisfaction how much he admires the audacity of the GD officials who stand their ground against the West. Georgia's challenge, replete with accusations of Western hypocrisy, moral decay, and general dysfunction, can be easily dismissed as an eccentricity of a small state run by a paranoid millionaire. It is, however, a sign of a global malaise. It is a concrete manifestation of a growing perception that the world is moving beyond Western hegemony and towards greater multipolarity with China forming not only an alternative center of power but also an alternative model of governance that can deliver prosperity and economic development without democracy or human rights.

It is a concrete manifestation of a growing perception that the world is moving beyond Western hegemony and towards greater multipolarity with China forming not only an alternative center of power but also an alternative model of governance that can deliver prosperity and economic development without democracy or human rights.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine tested Western resolve to defend the rules-based order and deter Russia's revanchism. The perception of Western hesitancy to act swiftly and decisively created a sense of uncertainty about the outcome

of the war and led many states to hedge their bets. Georgia was one of them. It seems that Ivanishvili believed from day one that Russia could not and would not be defeated and that it would be wise to placate rather than irritate an emboldened and aggressive great power next door. He successfully exploited the fear of the renewed war with Russia among the Georgian public in his election campaign and managed to project the image of a pragmatic and careful politician who would not take unnecessary risks. He did not, however, reveal the fact that Russian victory and concomitant Western weakening were also his preferred outcomes. For autocratic leaders bent on maintaining power and dominating the economic resources of their countries, multipolarity is an opportunity rather than a threat.

The EU was slow to recognize the strategic importance of Georgia's membership for its regional influence. This reluctance resulted in missed opportunities that are now challenging to recover.

The war has also redefined the balance of power in the South Caucasus and intensified competition with the increasing political and economic weight of Türkiye, China, and Iran. However, all actors, while competing with each other, seem to converge on the desire to keep the West out of the region. The only exception is Armenia but its options are limited, especially as Georgia joins the ranks of an informal anti-Western regional alignment despite formally being the EU candidate country. The EU was slow to recognize the strategic importance of Georgia's membership for its regional influence. This reluctance resulted in missed opportunities that are now challenging to recover. Failing to seize the next opportunity could come at a high cost for both Georgians and the European Union ■