

# The West Needs a Strategy to Support the Georgian “Eurovolution”

**G**eorgia teeters on the edge of authoritarianism. What was once a beacon of democracy in the South Caucasus, a country striving for European integration, has plunged into its deepest political crisis in decades. The October 2024 parliamentary elections, riddled with massive fraud and intimidation, and subsequent rejection of the European integration path have not only shattered public trust but have ignited waves of protests across the nation. These grassroots demonstrations, demanding justice and the restoration of democracy and the European integration efforts, have been met with an alarming escalation of state violence, repression, and democratic backsliding. The Georgian Dream (GD) regime, under the control of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, appears more determined than ever to consolidate its grip on power, even at the cost of Georgia’s European aspirations and complete Western isolation.

The atmosphere of the demonstrations is distinctly Georgian. Fireworks, marches, closed down Rustaveli Avenue, creative protests, New

Year’s Feast with a kilometer-long table (supra), strikes, and other peculiar forms of manifestations, while completely peaceful and dedicated, raise hopes that the Georgians do not plan to give in to self-proclaimed authoritarianism. While these protests resemble historical movements elsewhere in Europe, they will likely culminate in a uniquely Georgian outcome, which we will explore further below. What is already clear, however, is that the status quo before October 2024 can not be returned. Public trust in the Georgian Dream has been fundamentally broken, and no superficial reset to “factory settings” can restore it—not even among former Georgian Dream supporters.

***The stakes are high—not just for Georgia but also for the West. Failure to act decisively could allow Georgia to slip further into the orbit of authoritarian powers, embolden regimes worldwide, and erode the European Union’s influence in the region.***



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## The Legitimacy Crisis: A Democratic Fabric Torn Apart

The October 2024 elections were a turning point in Georgia's post-Soviet history. Observers noted glaring violations that undermined the integrity of the electoral process. From breaches in ballot secrecy to overt voter intimidation, the elections [resembled](#) a farcical exercise in democracy conducted in a spirit of [special operation](#) to maintain power at all costs. Reports from international monitors and investigative journalists described how GD loyalists used cameras, fake observers, and intimidation tactics to ensure votes were cast for the ruling party. Citizens faced threats of job loss, financial penalties, and even physical harm if they failed to comply.

However, perhaps the most egregious manipulation came from data misuse on Georgian citizens residing abroad. Carousel voting and fabricated ballots inflated turnout in key precincts, creating impossible discrepancies between the number of registered voters and those allegedly casting ballots. When a court briefly annulled election results in one district, the GD-controlled judiciary swiftly overturned the decision, highlighting the regime's iron grip on the justice system.

Meanwhile, independent media faced relentless attacks. Journalists reporting on electoral fraud were harassed, detained, and, in some cases, brutally assaulted. Opposition media, already crippled by financial sanctions and criminal proceedings,

operated under conditions of constant fear and surveillance. NGOs, long at the forefront of Georgia's democratic movement, were similarly targeted. Burdened by restrictive foreign agent laws and incessant government harassment, their capacity to observe and report on the elections was severely diminished. To their credit, three independent election observation missions were assembled anyway, and most of the electoral fraud was registered by the NGO-led observation and citizen groups.

These actions by the GD have invited troubling comparisons to the authoritarian regimes of Russia and Belarus. After the election results were declared, Georgian Dream displayed characteristic authoritarian behavior, swiftly bypassing constitutional court rulings—which it effectively controls—to secure its mandate to govern for another four years. The ensuing protests were disregarded, with the regime shifting its focus to seeking international legitimacy through handshakes, meetings, and congratulatory messages from Western leaders. However, only Georgia's immediate neighbors and Hungary have extended such recognition to date. When the government attempted to [tout](#) the NATO Secretary General's formal New Year congratulatory note as a diplomatic endorsement, a NATO spokesperson swiftly downplayed its significance, attributing it to routine bureaucratic annual correspondence..

## Repression and Resistance: The Battle for Georgia's European Soul

***Protesters have coalesced around two precise demands: new, free, and fair elections under international supervision and the immediate release of all political prisoners.***

The fraudulent elections triggered the Georgian Dream's November 28 decision to reverse European integration efforts, which led to unprecedented grassroots resistance. Since then, tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of Georgians have taken to the streets for over a month, braving cold weather and the holiday season to demand change. Protesters have coalesced around two precise demands: new, free, and fair elections under international supervision and the immediate release of all political prisoners.

But the regime has responded with systematic violence. Riot police armed with water cannons, tear gas, and batons have brutally suppressed demonstrations. [Reports](#) of torture in detention, threats of rape, and the use of chemical agents against protesters paint a grim picture of state-sanctioned violence. Civil servants, including diplomats, who dared to voice dissent have been fired en masse, further narrowing the space for opposition.

In December, the Georgian Dream [passed](#) a series of legislative amendments to further "strengthen" its authoritarian credentials. These amendments aimed to curb dissent, tighten control over the civil service, and suppress public resistance to its departure from the European path. Adopted under urgent procedures and enacted from January 1, these changes targeted key areas of civic life and governance, raising concerns about their impact on democracy and human rights.

The amendments to the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations prohibited items like pyrotechnics, lasers, and face coverings at rallies, citing their use in recent protests against police violence. The Administrative Offenses Code imposed steep fines and penalties for protest-related activities, including traffic blockades, graffiti, and disobeying police orders. It also expanded the scope for arbitrary detention and intrusive police searches without court orders.

The Police Law now allows non-competitive recruitment, opening doors to politically motivated hires. The Law on Civil Service introduced measures to politicize the civil service, including reclassifying department heads as political appointees, enabling arbitrary dismissals, and linking performance evaluations to political oversight. As expected, these laws were applied swiftly; over 800 civil servants were reportedly fired in just a few days.

## Scenarios Ahead

How these protests will end is anyone's guess. However, several factors will determine the outcome of the resistance. The first such factor is resilience and fatigue. As Jaba Devdariani notes elsewhere in this issue, the core group of the protesters in Tbilisi streets comprises the middle class and youth, for whom the red line of authoritarianism has been crossed and who have decided collectively and individually that they will resist the backsliding of Georgia at all costs. However, the protest energy dwells on the multiplication and proliferation of protests and success in fulfilling demands. Since the demands will not be fulfilled swiftly, the fatigue risk is high. So far, at least, the main hope of the GD, that the Georgians would forget the protests because of the New Year holidays, turned out futile. On New Year's Eve, there was a [huge demonstration](#) on Rustaveli Avenue.

However, if the fatigue prevails and the Georgian Dream manages to enter a new political year with an upper hand, it will likely attempt to move politics into a Venezuelan scenario, in which the protest is quelled, and the resistance awaits new political momentum, whether elections or other crises.

In another scenario, the Georgian Dream will secure international legitimacy or convince significant portions of Georgian society of its legitimacy

through its propaganda apparatus. The [visit](#) of the Council of Europe Secretary General was leveraged for this purpose, but Alain Berset's clarification that his visit was not an endorsement of the electoral outcomes undercut GD's narrative. Similarly, hopes were pinned on a planned visit by OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Chairperson Pia Kauma. However, the visit was [postponed](#) after Georgian civil society, opposition groups, and several OSCE parliamentary delegations conveyed concerns that GD intended to exploit the meetings to bolster its claims of legitimacy.

In this scenario, Georgian Dream banks on potential recognition from figures like Donald Trump or other Western leaders, hoping such endorsements would dishearten protesters and persuade them to "go home." While this expectation seems overly optimistic, it underscores GD's current focus on the battle for legitimacy. This obsession was evident when Irakli Kobakhidze, addressing a journalist from a critical TV station, demanded recognition as Prime Minister before allowing a question—highlighting how deeply this struggle has permeated the ruling party's priorities.

In a more optimistic scenario for the protesters, the tightening of sanctions and the deepening international isolation of the Georgian Dream leadership could pressure Ivanishvili to step back and use new elections as a bargaining chip. While this outcome would mark a significant victory for the resistance movement, it raises several unresolved questions. When should the elections take place—during the upcoming local elections in the fall 2025, or earlier? How should they be administered, and what new rules are needed to prevent the type of fraud that marred the October 26 elections?

Opposition parties have tentatively agreed that holding new elections under the old rules, without electronic vote counting, might be the most viable solution. However, this approach would require legislative changes, and if the current Parliament

is not recognized as legitimate, it is unclear who would implement such changes. Another option could involve restoring the legitimacy of the 2020–2024 Parliament, but this would require Georgian Dream to acknowledge past electoral fraud—something the ruling party is unlikely to concede.

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## A Fractured International Response

Over the 41 days of unrest in Georgia, the international response has been as fragmented as it has been critical, reflecting both solidarity with the Georgian people and the limitations of global diplomacy in confronting authoritarianism. While some countries and institutions have taken decisive action, others remain constrained by internal divisions or geopolitical calculations.

The European Parliament led the charge, [adopting](#) a resolution that unequivocally condemned the Georgian Dream regime's authoritarian turn and

called for new elections. The United States followed suit with a robust set of measures, including the [reintroduction](#) of the Megobari Act and the *Georgian Nightmare Non-recognition Act*, signaling Washington's unwillingness to legitimize the GD's rule. On December 27, U.S. sanctions [targeted](#) Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of GD, under the *Russian Harmful Foreign Activities Sanctions*. These sanctions froze Ivanishvili's assets, blocked transactions linked to his companies, and accused him of aligning Georgia with Moscow's interests while undermining democratic institutions. Earlier, the U.S. had [imposed](#) sanctions on GD officials for orchestrating violent crackdowns on protests and restricting democratic freedoms, including measures under the *Global Magnitsky Act*.

European nations also took significant steps. The Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—acted decisively and timely, [implementing](#) national sanctions against GD officials responsible for suppressing protests. Several Nordic countries [mirrored](#) this approach, while Germany [imposed](#) entry bans on nine individuals implicated in human rights abuses. The UK [added](#) its weight, sanctioning top officials, freezing assets, and suspending defense cooperation with Georgia. These actions underscored a growing consensus among key European players that Georgia's democratic backsliding must not go unanswered.

However, the EU's collective response reveals deep internal fractures. The European Commission [proposed](#) suspending visa-free travel for Georgian officials and their families, highlighting Georgia's serious democratic backsliding. Yet, broader EU sanctions have stalled due to veto threats from Hungary and Slovakia, underscoring the bloc's difficulty in presenting a unified front against authoritarian drift.

Despite these efforts, the Georgian Dream regime appears unyielding. While international sanctions

are significant, they have not yet curbed repression or restored Georgia's democratic trajectory. The question now is whether this patchwork of measures will coalesce into a strategy strong enough to influence the regime or whether Georgia's struggle for democracy will remain a litmus test for the West's resolve.

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## A Need for a Common Western Strategy

The international community must act decisively to counter Georgia's authoritarian turn. At least some building blocks for continuous pressure from Georgia's Western partners must be implemented as part of a wider strategy to counter Russian influence in the region.

(1) *Delegitimize the Georgian Dream regime.* The West must unequivocally reject the October 2024 elections and refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the Georgian Dream-controlled parliament and government. This includes barring Georgian officials from international events and revoking the credentials of Georgian MPs at key forums such as PACE. Such steps would isolate the regime diplomatically and underscore its lack of legitimacy. Any visits or high-level interactions should be suspended until the political crisis is resolved. Georgian officials should not have an opportunity to participate in such events as the Munich Security Conference or GLOBSEC and the bilateral and multilateral parliamentary or Government-to-Government formats must be delayed or canceled.

(2) *Push for New Elections and Prisoner Release.* Western governments must pressure Ivanishvili to release political prisoners and call new elections. This requires abandoning diplomatic niceties and adopting a more confrontational stance. Futile calls for dialogue only embolden the GD regime, while clear, uncompromising demands signal Western resolve.

(3) *Support Democratic Forces.* The EU and its member states should redirect financial and logistical support to civil society organizations, independent media, and opposition groups. Facilitating platforms for Georgian democrats to engage with global policymakers is essential to amplifying their voices and strengthening their position. So far, the promises have been made in this direction, but nothing substantial has happened. Salome Zourabichvili should be received as a legitimate president of Georgia, including at the highest level in the EU countries. This will definitely increase the price of isolation for the Georgian Dream leadership.

(4) *Expand Targeted Sanctions.* The current crisis can only be dispelled if the calculation for Bidzina Ivanishvili changes and he realizes that the increased isolation will hit him financially and his support will crumble. Sanctions are the only viable instrument to this end. Therefore, the Western states must expand sanctions against GD officials and their associates involved in electoral fraud and human rights abuses.

The EU member states, bilaterally or at the EU level, should target Bidzina Ivanishvili and his assets, as already done by the United States. In addition, however, more individuals and groups near Mr. Ivanishvili can be targeted. These groups include:

**False Witness Police Officers:** This will undermine the current vicious cycle on which the arrest and mistreatment of the protesters is based. The police officers routinely provide false testimonies in the

courts, claiming that they arrested the protesters when, in reality, the special tasks department arrests and beats the protesters. The courts never pay attention to the fact that the chest cameras of the police officers are offline, despite the duty to have them turned on during the arrests. This system is coordinated by the legal unit of the Police Department.

**Heads of Special Tasks Department Units:** The Western partners should impose travel bans on the mid-rank leadership of the Special Tasks Department, which is known for exceeding force, illegally detaining the protesters, and treating them inhumanly. At least one high-level Department head resigned and fled the country; therefore, his testimonies could be instrumental in creating such lists.

**Georgian Dream Propagandists:** The Western sanctions should target individuals disseminating state propaganda that undermines democracy. The state propaganda rests on the Imedi TV and PosTV, as well as the Georgian Public Broadcaster and Rustavi 2. These TV stations have been instrumental in spreading anti-Western propaganda, promoting hatred towards the West, justifying violence by the GD, and demonizing democracy defenders, as well as spreading anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian messages. Imposing travel bans and financial sanctions on them would seriously undermine their credibility in Georgia. It would serve as a cold shower for many propagandists, such as Irakli Rukhadze, owner of the Imedi TV, who is an American citizen and runs several companies in the UK.

**Georgian Dream's Political Council Members:** Sanctions similar to those under the Magnitsky Act or the measures against Bidzina Ivanishvili could also be extended to the Georgian Dream political council members. This would serve not only as a symbolic step but would also create a serious wedge in the GD leadership, who are collectively

responsible for the country's democratic backsliding and crackdown on the peaceful protesters. A recent [statement](#) by the GD political council, a combination of propaganda lies and conspiracy theories, is a clear testament to the state of affairs in the party. The statement accused a so-called "global war party" and its "Deep State metastases" of controlling these actions, framing them as part of a broader conspiracy to destabilize Georgia and force the country into a devastating war. It also alleged that all critics of the Georgian government, whether international or domestic, are members of this network, driven not by their nations' interests but by the agenda of the global war party.

**National Bank Chairperson:** Natia Turnava, a former minister of economy, has played a key role in transforming the relatively independent National Bank of Georgia (NBG) into a fully compliant tool of Georgian Dream. Under her leadership, the National Bank has depleted national reserves to ease political pressure on the government and facilitated the establishment of mechanisms enabling the US-sanctioned former prosecutor general, Otar Partskhaladze, to bypass Western financial sanctions.

**GD-affiliated Businesses:** Bidzina Ivanishvili and his family's business empire have not fully been targeted in the West. The Kartu Group (including the Kartu Bank), its leadership, and the construction businesses owned by Ivanishvili's family members have avoided sanctions so far. The imposition of targeted financial sanctions on these individuals will seriously undermine the financial support for the Georgian Dream and serve as a serious warning for the Georgian business community.

## Geopolitical Stakes

Georgia's current trajectory holds significant consequences for regional stability and the global democratic landscape. Should the Georgian Dream re-

gime further entrench its power, the country risks becoming a de facto satellite of Moscow, weakening Western sanctions and bolstering Russia's strategic position in the Black Sea region. Such a scenario would erode the EU's influence in the South Caucasus, creating a power vacuum ripe for exploitation by Russia and its proxies.

***Controlling Georgia's strategic ports and transit routes could allow Russia (and China) to tighten its grip on regional trade and communications, amplifying its leverage over Europe and the South Caucasus.***

The stakes are particularly high as Georgia's location makes it a critical link in the energy and transport corridors connecting Europe and Asia. A GD regime aligned with Moscow could jeopardize projects like the Southern Gas Corridor and Middle Corridor and weaken Europe's ability to diversify its energy sources away from Russia. Furthermore, controlling Georgia's strategic ports and transit routes could allow Russia (and China) to tighten its grip on regional trade and communications, amplifying its leverage over Europe and the South Caucasus. For Western powers, losing Georgia to authoritarian influence would not only represent a strategic defeat but also compromise efforts to build a secure and independent region resistant to Kremlin ambitions.

***The failure of Western democracies to decisively support Georgian reformers risks disillusioning a population that has long identified itself as part of the European family.***

Domestically, the crisis in Georgia is not only about governance but about the survival of democratic values in a region long plagued by instability. The GD regime's continued crackdowns on opposition,



civil society, and media have alienated a majority of the Georgian population and signaled to the world that democratic backsliding can occur even in countries with strong pro-European aspirations. The failure of Western democracies to decisively support Georgian reformers risks disillusioning a population that has long identified itself as part of the European family. This lack of support could ultimately drive Georgian society into the arms of the very authoritarianism it has fought against for decades.

The crisis also has broader ramifications for the global democratic order. If the West fails to act,

authoritarian regimes worldwide will see this as an endorsement of their playbook: eroding institutions, silencing dissent, and aligning with hostile powers to undermine global stability. The Georgian case serves as a litmus test for whether Western democracies can uphold their principles and counter authoritarian influence. As Georgian protesters rally for a European future despite crackdowns, their struggle is a reminder that the battle for democracy is far from confined to national borders—it is a global fight that demands a united and resolute strategy ■