

The Line They Don't Cross

Why Georgia's Armed Forces Stay Out of Politics?

“**W**e don't have an army, we don't have weapons, and we won't have any” - this clumsy phrase [uttered](#) by Salome Zourabichvili in December 2019 was intended to emphasize the importance of education and science for the country's development. The remark, understandably, sparked widespread criticism. As the commander-in-chief, the president was accused of disrespecting the armed forces. This was one of many gaffes attributed to Ms. Zourabichvili. Still, upon closer examination, her words were not far from the reality of Georgia's military, particularly after years of Georgian Dream (GD) governance.

As Georgia descends into a political crisis sparked by the Georgian Dream's largely manipulated elections and the suspension of the European integra-

tion process, with citizens taking to the streets daily to confront police brutality, many are questioning the potential role of the armed forces. Will they be deployed by the authorities to suppress the protests, or could they stand with the people in their pursuit of freedom, democracy, and a European future?

The hypothesis cautiously proposed here is that barring extraordinary circumstances—such as unprecedented violence, mass bloodshed, or immense pressure from the regime—the military is likely to remain on the sidelines. This stance can be attributed both to deep-seated historical trends that have shaped Georgia's modern identity and to more recent factors tied to the GD's style of governance.



THORNIKE GORDADZE
Contributor

Thornike 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 Senior Researcher at the research institute Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Paris SciencesPo (2005).



From Foreign Entity to a Lack of Prestige

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guardians of secularism, Georgia's military development has been shaped by its unique cultural, political, and historical circumstances.

During Georgia's brief First Republic (1918–1921), efforts were made to establish structured civil-military relations and a capable military, achieving some notable successes against neighboring adversaries. However, the republic's armed forces were ultimately no match for the Red Army, which invaded and occupied Georgia in 1921. This resulted in Sovietization and its absorption into a new imperial framework.

The Soviet Union, unlike its predecessors, aimed to sever ties with the past by systematically dismantling the former military elite. This purge particularly targeted Georgian officers from the Tsarist Army and the First Republic, most of whom came from non-proletarian backgrounds. Many

were executed, purged, or forced into exile. Within the Soviet framework, the military held a politically subordinate role despite its immense size and firepower. Under the control of the Communist Party and the Ministry of Defense, it functioned as an instrument of state power, closely monitored by the KGB and political officers (*zampolits*) to ensure strict ideological compliance. After Stalin's era, leadership in the military was predominantly reserved for Party members, with over 90% of officers belonging to the Communist Party or its youth organization, the Komsomol. This structure of military-political relations was replicated in most Soviet successor states, including Georgia.

The Soviet Union's ability to avoid military coups throughout its existence is a testament to the Communist Party's tight grip on power. The only significant instance of military defiance occurred during the August 1991 coup attempt when elite units refused to obey the conspirators' orders.

For Georgians, the [Soviet military](#) often felt like a “foreign” institution. Inter-ethnic tensions were frequent, with clashes between soldiers from different ethnic groups compounded by language barriers that disadvantaged non-Slavic recruits. Proficiency in Russian, the army's official language of command, was crucial for career progression. However, in 1989, only 31% of Georgians reported fluency in Russian, and even fewer could write it proficiently. This linguistic barrier and cultural differences meant that Georgian officers who advanced to high ranks were often culturally Russified, distancing them from Georgian society.

In the early 1990s, as Georgia set out to build its own armed forces, the Soviet legacy loomed large. Ethnic Georgian generals from the Soviet military, such as Nadibaidze and Kamkamidze, were invited to join the new national army. However, many of these officers struggled with the Georgian language, underscoring the cultural and institutional imprint of the Soviet era. This disconnect high-

lighted the immense challenge of creating a cohesive national army from a fragmented and Sovietized military elite.

Non-Russians and non-Slavs faced systemic barriers in the Soviet military. Slavs dominated combat and elite units, with Russians alone comprising 69.5% of the officer corps, far exceeding their 50.8% population share. Non-Slavs were overrepresented in non-combat roles, reinforcing perceptions of inequality within the armed forces.

Initially, the Red Army included national units with territorial recruitment, allowing soldiers to serve in their home regions. However, as Bolshevik leaders grew wary of these units, they were disbanded by 1938. Briefly revived during World War II for mobilization purposes, they were dismantled again in the 1950s. Georgian divisions, prominent during the war, were dissolved after 1956 following the brutal repression of protests in Tbilisi. The refusal of Georgian soldiers to participate in the crackdown underscored their alienation from the Soviet military system, and the army's actions shattered the wartime camaraderie of World War II. The Red Army, once glorified by Soviet propaganda, was increasingly viewed by Georgians as an occupying force.

By the late Soviet period, military service had become deeply unattractive to Georgians. The trauma of the 1956 repression, coupled with economic, social, and ideological factors, further alienated them from the military. Unlike the Tsarist army, the Red Army's officer corps offered limited opportunities for Georgians. While Stalin's era briefly elevated Georgian officers, destalinization and the execution of Beria led to the decline of Georgian influence in Moscow. Many Georgians shifted their ambitions to local opportunities in the Communist Party, the KGB, or the Ministry of Interior, providing better social mobility prospects and access to informal economic networks.

From the 1960s onward, military professions were largely excluded from the ranks of Georgia's Soviet elite. Society underwent a "gentrification" process where cultural and intellectual elites—such as artists, writers, academics, and entertainers—rose to prominence alongside Communist Party leaders and state enterprise directors. This group formed a privileged class that endured even after the collapse of the USSR. Military officers, particularly those from provincial backgrounds, were left out of this elite circle, unable to attain significant social prestige despite their aspirations.

Even within Georgia, military institutions like the Tbilisi Higher Artillery School saw limited participation from ethnic Georgians. Soviet data consistently placed Georgians among the lowest in generals per capita, with only around 120 Georgian generals throughout Soviet history. This lack of prestige in military careers continued after independence even though the military remained one of Georgia's most trusted institutions, alongside the church.

The legacy of the Soviet era left an indelible mark on Georgia's military development. After independence, efforts to build a professional and autonomous military faced significant challenges, including the lingering influence of Soviet structures and the social and cultural dynamics that shaped Georgian society.

Solders or Fighters? Post-Soviet Chaos and Militia Politics

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The collapse of the Soviet army left Georgia without the necessary officers or material base to build a new military. Defense and security were critical for the young state, but informal armed groups,

starkly contrasting the Huntingtonian idea of the professional, apolitical soldier, filled the vacuum left by the Soviet collapse. In the 1990s, the military landscape of Georgia was dominated by the figure of the "warrior-militiaman," whose presence was shaped by the civil war and the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, fueled by Russian-backed separatists. This chaotic environment blurred the legal and illegal domains between military and non-military.

The civil war, which began in December 1991, created conditions for militias to intervene in politics, with some even attempting to overthrow the government by force. In December 1991, an armed rebellion by a faction of the National Guard, allied with the Mkhedrioni militia, toppled President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Similar mutinies and coup attempts followed throughout the decade, underscoring the instability of the period. Unlike professional armies led by autonomous officers, militias comprised individuals with political affiliations and personal interests, driven less by a desire to defend the state and more by ambitions to control or exert influence. Eliminating militias and the professionalization of Georgia's armed forces by the late 1990s eventually ended these political interventions, which disappeared entirely by the late 2000s.

The origins of Georgian militias were rooted in the waning control of Moscow during Gorbachev's era and the rise of nationalist movements. Early armed groups were often linked to political organizations, recruiting members through networks of friends, relatives, and neighbors. These groups attracted a mix of ideologues committed to independence and marginalized individuals, including former criminals and rebels. This convergence of worlds produced a militia culture that historian Stephen F. Jones described as "autonomous organizations led by 'brothers' or 'buddies' (*dzmakatsebi*)."¹ Major political parties like the National Democratic Party, the Georgian Helsinki Union, and the Pop-

ular Front had their armed formations. Over time, militias such as the Mkhedrioni and Tetri Artzivi (White Eagle) transitioned into political entities, further blurring the line between political and military spheres.

Ethnic tensions also significantly influenced the formation of militias. Armed groups emerged in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, ostensibly to defend ethnic communities. These groups, however, often exacerbated divisions, deepening the cycle of violence. The militias' focus on ethnic identity and community defense underscored their role as fragmented, localized forces rather than unified state institutions.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also discredited the ethos and prestige of the regular soldier. Young Georgians, disillusioned by the Soviet military's failures, were drawn instead to the camaraderie and perceived glamour of militias. As Charles Fairbanks Jr. noted, the "strange glamour" of post-Soviet paramilitaries, with their informality and defiance of traditional military discipline, contrasted sharply with the regimented life of regular soldiers. The motivations for joining militias were often more social than ideological, driven by loyalty, friendship, or fascination with militia leaders, many of whom had no prior military experience. Figures like Loti Kobalia, a bakery truck driver; Akaki Eliava, a theatre technician, and Jaba Ioseliani, a writer-dramatist, embodied the militia culture, emphasizing personal charisma and networks over military professionalism.

Far from the Huntingtonian model of the professional soldier disconnected from societal dynamics, Georgia's militiamen were deeply embedded in their communities. Their personal ties and societal roles shaped their actions, interests, and worldviews. This integration blurred the boundaries between the military and civilian spheres, complicating efforts to establish a professional and autonomous military institution.

The onset of the civil war created a chaotic system where political, administrative, and military domains became indistinguishable. Armed groups became indispensable for political and economic survival, fostering new forms of wealth accumulation and informal governance. This system entrenched a predatory economy where the support of armed groups was essential for political and economic relevance. These dynamics perpetuated the militia phenomenon until the late 1990s, when efforts to professionalize Georgia's armed forces began to consolidate state control over legitimate violence. However, the legacies of this period, including blurred institutional boundaries and fragmented authority, continued to influence Georgia's military and political development in the following years.

The End of Militias, Corruption, and Political Engagement in the Army (1996–2004)

By the late 1990s, militias had been mainly disbanded, and Eduard Shevardnadze's consolidation of power reassured Western partners. However, this "stabilization" fell short of expectations for a strong, functional state as corruption deeply infiltrated legal enforcement structures. The police and the Ministry of the Interior became Shevardnadze's primary power base but were notorious for widespread racketeering targeting both citizens and businesses.

Although the military gained some respect by retreating to the barracks, it was also plagued by corruption. Conscript practices, equipment procurement, and inflated personnel rosters became avenues for illicit gains. By the late 1990s, while the military budget accounted for around 40,000 personnel, only 10,000 soldiers were actually serving, allowing Defense Ministry officials to profit from the discrepancy.

Despite Western pressure to streamline the security apparatus, Georgia maintained over a dozen security services. Efforts to reform these structures risked destabilizing the fragile system, as demonstrated by the National Guard [mutiny](#) in 2001, which was defused only after Shevardnadze assured the unit it would not be disbanded.

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Military tensions also reflected Georgia's geopolitical orientation as it was caught between Russia and the West. The Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP), [launched](#) in 2002 with USD 64 million in US aid, symbolized growing Western influence, sparking Russian concerns over NATO expansion. Pro-Russian and pro-Western factions clashed within the armed forces, exemplified by the 2001 Mukhrovani mutiny, which aimed to discredit pro-Western reforms.

By 2003, internal military dissent had intensified. Special Forces officers publicly [resigned](#), citing poor conditions and funding. Analysts linked this act to rising tensions between Shevardnadze and pro-Western reformers, foreshadowing the Rose Revolution later that year.

Post-Rose Revolution Georgia: Achieving Combat Readiness by Radical Reforms and Political Control

The United National Movement (UNM) government that came to power following the Rose Revolution inherited an army of paupers whose hierarchy was steeped in corruption and where, except for several small elite units equipped and trained by the Americans and other NATO partners, the soldiers were not adequately fed, clothed and shod.

The armed forces' [budget](#) in 2003 was only GEL 67 million (USD 31 million), representing only 1.1% of the GDP. The new government began to reform the army with the same enthusiasm as other state structures. The army budget grew exponentially to reach GEL 160 million in 2004 (USD 77 million and 1.4% of the GDP) and GEL 358 million GEL (USD 197 million and 3.3% of the GDP) in 2005. But the record budget was reached in 2007-2008: the equivalent of GEL 1.5-1.6 billion or USD 893-847 million and 8.5-9% of the GDP. These record increases were to finance the radical transformation of the army to bring it up to NATO standards, to the extent that membership of the latter, with the restoration of territorial integrity, was the number one geopolitical objective.

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Between 2006 and 2008, Georgia undertook a significant effort to enhance its army's combat capabilities, purchasing record amounts of equipment from NATO member states and Israel. The Saakashvili government also raised the salaries of soldiers and officers to curb corruption, channeling substantial funds into rapidly constructing new military infrastructure, bases, and hospitals. Georgia launched its military industry through the state-owned company Delta to further strengthen defense capabilities, which produced armored vehicles (Didgori) and drones. Participation in international coalitions, such as the US-led mission in [Iraq](#) and NATO's ISAF operation in [Afghanistan](#), was also expanded to improve interoperability with Western forces.

However, political control over the army during the United National Movement's rule presented several challenges. The post-Rose Revolution lead-

ership viewed absolute loyalty from the military as essential, given its capacity for violence and fire-power. With a sincere commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration and a confrontational stance toward Russia—already employing hybrid tactics and direct aggression in 2008—the government sought to purge the army of pro-Russian elements and individuals deemed disloyal or susceptible to manipulation by hostile forces.

Some experts contend that political control over the military increased under Saakashvili's presidency compared to the pre-Rose Revolution era. This control was intended to create a highly combat-ready force aligned with Georgia's pro-Western orientation and committed to Euro-Atlantic integration.

During the United National Movement's nearly nine years in power, Georgia had seven defense ministers, with only three—Okruashvili, Kezerashvili, and Akhalaia—serving for more than a year. Experts agree that such frequent turnover is far from ideal for establishing the foundations of a new military. The political leadership, emboldened by its dramatic success in police reform—most notably the creation of the Patrol Police and improvements in crime statistics—believed that similar methods could rapidly transform the armed forces. This approach demanded strict obedience from military officers to the political leadership, including the defense minister and deputies.

The government's strategy involved replacing entrenched figures with younger, honest individuals untainted by corruption. However, unlike police reform, where rapid personnel changes yielded immediate results, building a professional military requires more time and expertise. While replacing corrupt police officers with motivated, inexperienced recruits had a notable impact, applying the same formula to the military proved far more challenging. Training professional soldiers and culti-

vating an effective command structure is a lengthy process that does not lend itself to quick fixes.

Promotion within the military was often based on loyalty rather than merit, leading to opportunistic officers adapting their positions to align with the prevailing political climate. For instance, Colonel Levan Nikoleishvili, a protégé of Defense Minister Okruashvili and head of the General Staff, became an [advocate](#) of the “doctrine of neutrality” and a favored expert on pro-Georgian Dream television channels after the change in government. His shift in rhetoric coincided with the growing influence of pro-Russian propaganda within these outlets.

Following the August 2008 war with Russia, which ended in a defeat for Georgian forces, military spending decreased significantly. By 2012, shortly before the Georgian Dream came to power, the defense budget had dropped to GEL 812 million (approximately USD 362 million and 3% of the GDP). This decline reflected the diminished focus on military procurement and modernization in the post-war period.

Georgian Dream: The Army as Administrative Resource

An analysis of Georgia's defense policy under the Georgian Dream reveals that combat readiness and national defense are not top priorities. The 2024 [defense budget](#) of GEL 1,380 million (approximately USD 460 million) is less than half the amount allocated in 2007 and represents just 1.6% of the GDP—a stark contrast to Azerbaijan and Armenia's defense spending of 6-7% of the GDP. Of this budget, two-thirds are allocated to salaries and pensions, with only 10% directed toward equipment and training. The ground forces, officially listed as 20,000 troops, realistically operate with 10,000-12,000 soldiers, while Georgia has effectively abandoned its navy and air force.

The GD government views war as unwinnable and treats the military as a social support system rather than a defense force. Soldiers, mainly from modest backgrounds, are provided with decent salaries, housing benefits, and even spiritual resources such as [camouflage-patterned Bibles](#), often supplied by “friendly” companies through opaque procurement practices. In return, the military is expected to maintain loyalty to the regime, particularly during elections. Soldiers avoid dissent to safeguard their benefits and financial security.

The military has also been leveraged as a diplomatic tool to foster defense ties with the United States, countering criticism of the GD’s perceived pro-Russian leanings. However, with the GD’s recent pivot toward Moscow, cooperation with the US on defense matters has stalled, raising concerns about the loyalty and morale within the armed forces. While senior commanders are appointed mainly based on their loyalty to the government, many mid- and lower-ranking officers remain staunchly pro-Western, shaped by their experiences in the 2008 war against Russia and Georgia’s prior Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

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The GD relies on the Ministry of Interior forces, supplemented by semi-criminal groups, to manage protests, avoiding direct involvement of the army, which could risk defection under extreme circumstances. The GD’s 12-year purge of critical elements in the military has led to 3,000 former soldiers joining Ukrainian units, highlighting the regime’s strategy of sidelining dissenting voices within the armed forces.

As noted earlier, political control over the military was already a feature of the United National Movement. However, under the Georgian Dream, this control has reached unprecedented levels, largely due to the enhanced roles of three key entities: the Military Police, the General Inspectorate of the Armed Forces, and Counter-Military Espionage. These agencies, alongside the State Security Service (SUS)—a politically loyal apparatus and the GD’s primary instrument for retaining power—play a central role in monitoring the armed forces.

Rather than physically deploying the army, the GD appears tempted to leverage its prestige to counter critics of electoral fraud and the suspension of European integration. Public opinion polls consistently [show](#) the army as one of Georgia’s most trusted institutions, often competing with or even surpassing the Orthodox Church in popularity. This trust makes the army an appealing symbol for the regime, which is desperate for signs of legitimacy amid a contested parliament, government, and presidency.

Unlike the Church, which is not institutionally dependent on the government and often vocal in its support of GD policies, the army remains largely silent. While dissenting voices exist within the clergy, the Church largely aligns with the regime. The army, by contrast, is presumed to have a higher share of pro-Western personnel but maintains a much quieter stance, potentially due to institutional dependence on government structures.

The regime’s precarious legitimacy has led it to tread carefully in its dealings with the military. A clear example was the inauguration of the GD’s new, pro-Russian president—a former footballer—in a low-profile ceremony lasting just 25 minutes, held behind closed doors to avoid public dissent. Although the president is constitutionally the commander-in-chief, the regime avoided staging a military parade, fearing potential backlash. Instead, it settled for inviting a few high-ranking

officers, including the Chief of Staff, to create the appearance of institutional support while carefully scrutinizing outgoing President Zourabichvili's remarks to the military to prevent her from rallying their loyalty.

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The freeze in Western cooperation with the Georgian armed forces has left them more vulnerable to the regime's influence. Participation in international programs previously offered the military some protection from pressure by GD-aligned entities like the SUS, the Military Police, and the General Inspectorate. However, while the GD has avoided overtly escalating control over the army, it remains cautious about provoking a backlash.

Predicting the regime's next steps toward the military is challenging, particularly if the crisis deepens. The GD would prefer the protests to lose momentum and the international community to accept the status quo, avoiding the need for extreme measures such as declaring a state of emergency and enforcing it with military involvement. However, if protests persist, sanctions intensify, the economic crisis worsens, and the regime's base erodes, the GD will face two choices: either escalate repression by turning the army into an extension of the Ministry of the Interior's special forces or concede to demands for new elections.

Ultimately, Bidzina Ivanishvili will make the decision, weighing the comparative risks of these options. The outcome remains uncertain, and much will depend on the evolving dynamics of domestic unrest and international pressure ■