

# Georgia's Role in the Western Resilience Against the Authoritarian Axis

**T**he current political climate in Georgia is marked by the ruling Georgian Dream party's increasing alignment with Russia, Iran, and China, alongside escalating authoritarian measures against local dissent. This shift has alienated Western allies, diminishing the EU and the US's influence over the Georgian Dream. The West's remaining options include imposing sanctions and bolstering pro-democracy forces within Georgia. In the given status quo, three potential outcomes could be seen as most probable: (1) under the mounting wave of repressions, the regime successfully imposes authoritarian laws, pushing Georgia towards a Belarus-like state; (2) the regime's repression leads to civil unrest and eventual Russian intervention, akin to the Maidan scenario and (3) under strategic US pressure and the threat of sanctions, the Georgian Dream agrees to hold free and fair elections.

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Although the most favorable, the third scenario is also the least likely due to global geopolitical instability and US internal politics. The trajectory that develops in Georgia in the longer term will depend mainly on regional geopolitics, particularly the dynamics of the war in Ukraine. However, in the six months leading up to the milestone elections in Georgia in October 2024, the developments in the country could significantly impact the broader authoritarian push against the rules-based international system. Therefore, active support and decisive action from Georgia's allies in the US is as urgent as ever. It is crucial to elevate the issue on the political agenda to prevent the first two dire outcomes.



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## Current State of Affairs

The current situation in Georgia is a reflection of regional and global processes. Authoritarian regimes, within the framework of their aggressive revisionist policies, are attempting to dismantle free and democratic values and the rules-based international system. Warfare waged by Belarus and Russia against their own people and neighbors is a clear illustration of this. Unfortunately, Georgia has found itself on the wrong side of this battle. Today, Georgia, along with Russia and Belarus, is a country where the government openly opposes Western political models and values. Not long ago, the Georgian Dream discussed integration into NATO and the European Union. Still, even then, it was clear that the Georgian Dream's political system was incompatible with European values and the declared goal of integration into Western institutions. The epistolary messages voiced by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the chairman of the Georgian Dream, in April 2024 were heard loud and clear in Moscow that the ruling party has formally abandoned its Western orientation and stepped into an authoritarian path.

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Today, even Georgia's closest strategic partners have questions about what is happening in the country. Do the majority of citizens approve of living in the kind of state that Georgia currently is? Where do they stand in the battle between authoritarianism and democracy? How is it possible that a nation that predominantly supports European and Euro-Atlantic integration is governed by an openly anti-Western power?

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In functioning democracies, fundamental questions are answered through free and fair elections, but today, Georgian society is deprived of that opportunity. Due to the absence of an independent judiciary, the lack of accountable law enforcement agencies, and a fair electoral system, the entire administrative resource serves the interests of the ruling power, not the national interests. Georgia's strategic partners have repeatedly [noted](#) that the line between the state and the ruling party has been erased. Especially after adopting the Russian-style law on foreign influence, it has become clear that it is nearly impossible to hold free and fair elections in present-day Georgia. Consequently, Georgia today is a Russian-type captured state, incapable of taking steps toward European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Clearly, the path chosen by the government is not Western-oriented but aimed at creating a state similar to those of Lukashenko and Putin. The adoption and enforcement of the "Russian law" is merely a formal confirmation and an attempt at the de jure legitimation of this reality.

## Accelerated Authoritarianism and West-less-ness

Even a short-term chronology of the Georgian Dream's actions in April-June 2024 shows an apparent drift away from the West and an alignment with authoritarian regimes. First, the parliament adopted a family of laws (the Russian-style law of foreign influences, the offshore law, and the anti-LGBT law) that significantly strengthened authoritarian tools for oppressing various segments of Georgian society and improved the regime's corrupt money laundering patterns.

Second, the ruling regime has fully aligned its mainstream narratives with Russia, [declaring](#) the entire West a “global war party” and [accusing](#) a senior EU representative of making murder threats. Third, the Georgian dream signaled an alignment with another authoritarian regime by demonstratively [attending](#) the Iranian President’s funeral, upsetting Georgia’s key strategic partners - the US and Israel. Finally, by [handing](#) over the most important strategic asset – the Anaklia port project - to Chinese entities sanctioned by the US, the Georgian Dream rubber-stamped the formalization of its foreign policy shift. The concert of those actions damaged relations with Georgia’s key strategic partner and ally, the United States, to the point where top officials faced sanctions, and the Secretary of State announced a [reassessment](#) of the relations, instead earning significant [praise](#) from Moscow.

Another critical question is why the Georgian Dream accelerated the *de jure* shift in foreign policy right before the 26 October parliamentary elections. Political dynamics in Georgia and the poor performance of the country’s fragmented opposition indicated that everything was going well for the Georgian Dream, and they should not have had a problem winning the elections. Accordingly, there was no need to strengthen authoritarian tools for winning elections.

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Thus, the accelerated enforcement of such an evidently controversial trajectory seemed only logical after securing victory in the elections. Looking back at how hard the Georgian Dream tried to [sabotage](#) the EU candidate status, the only rational explanation of ‘why now?’ can be clandestine

pressure from Russia to immediately disengage Ivanishvili from the EU integration process. It seems that Russia demanded concrete actions from the oligarch to prove his reliability and loyalty by ‘improving’ his earlier mistake of not being able to jeopardize the EU candidate status. Moreover, the current policy of the Georgian Dream puts all achievements made on the path to European integration at risk. Georgia’s declared foreign policy U-turn is, thus, the shortest and surest way to achieve Russia’s ultimate goal – maintaining Georgia firmly within its sphere of influence and blocking its path toward the EU and NATO.

De jure change in foreign policy before the elections is also of principal importance for Ivanishvili. For the Georgian Dream, these will be the first elections in which the party runs an openly anti-Western campaign. If the Georgian Dream wins on this platform, Bidzina Ivanishvili will have achieved the legitimization of a new social contract similar to the one that Lukashenko had before the 2021 presidential elections in Belarus, where, in exchange for nominal ‘peace and stability,’ society must give up its freedoms and liberties.

## Russian Threat – Boogeyman for Power Retention

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The governance model adopted by the Georgian Dream, with influences from its new authoritarian allies, relies on tactics of violence, intimidation, and terror. This approach exacerbates societal divisions and polarization, making governance through democratic means increasingly untenable. By fostering an atmosphere of fear and divi-

sion, the Georgian Dream has entrenched a binary view of society: those who support the party are considered legitimate citizens. Those who oppose are deemed enemies of the state. This divisive strategy has eroded the fabric of Georgian society and debilitated the functioning of even the fundamental democratic principles. The government's actions, including adopting laws that suppress civil liberties and aligning with Russian interests, only deepen this divide and undermine any potential for reconciliation.

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In Georgia's volatile political landscape, both Russia and the Georgian Dream have consistently forewarned about the consequences of the regime losing power. They [warn](#) that such an outcome would plunge the country into chaos, drawing parallels to the Maidan protests in Ukraine, which led to significant upheaval and eventually Russian military intervention. The Maidan-like scenario serves as a potent threat to dissuade voters from seeking change, effectively suggesting that the threat of Russian aggression is a reason to keep the Georgian Dream in power.

The strategic narrative [propagated](#) by both Russia and the Georgian Dream emphasizes the potential for chaos and destabilization, creating a perception that only the current ruling party can maintain peace and stability. This fearmongering is designed to intimidate the electorate, portraying opposition movements as harbingers of instability and violence. Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's [remark](#) stressing that the Maidan revolution would not be allowed in Georgia is a part of this coordinated messaging strategy, which aims

to paint a dire picture of what might happen if the opposition gains power.

Furthermore, the [influx](#) of Russians into Georgia in recent years adds another layer of complexity. The presence of a significant Russian population could be manipulated to justify Russian intervention under the guise of protecting their rights. This scenario is not just theoretical and presents a danger that could be triggered if the Georgian Dream's grip on power is threatened.

The strategy of leveraging the threat of Russian aggression to maintain power creates a perilous situation. In fact, if the Georgian Dream continues to erode democratic institutions and distance the country from its strategic partners, the likelihood of destabilization and conflict increases. This policy of aligning with Russia and adopting its authoritarian tactics undermines Georgia's sovereignty and democratic aspirations, posing a significant risk to both the country and the broader region. The use of the threat of Russian aggression as a political tool by the Georgian Dream is a dangerous gambit that could lead to the destruction of democracy and cause destabilization in Georgia.

## Potential Consequences for the West

The implications of the Georgian Dream's policies extend far beyond Georgia's borders, posing significant risks to Western interests and regional stability. The adoption of the "Russian law" on the "transparency of foreign influence" marks a critical juncture, signaling a deliberate turn away from democratic norms and Western alliances. If Georgia continues on this path, it could become a satellite state firmly within Russia's sphere of influence, undermining decades of Western efforts to promote democracy and stability in the region. Georgia's Belarusization will undermine Western interests in the wider region.

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One of the most immediate consequences would be the erosion of democratic governance. This shift not only threatens to dismantle the progress made in building democratic institutions but also poses a direct challenge to the rules-based international order that the West strives to uphold. Georgia's alignment with authoritarian regimes like Russia, Iran, and China would create new possibilities for autocratic regimes to bypass sanctions, money laundering, and illicit trade and transportation routes to support their aggressive agendas. This will immediately strengthen the war efforts of those countries in Ukraine and the Middle East, dramatically dominating Western interests and influence in those critical regions.

Moreover, the geopolitical ramifications are profound. Georgia's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia makes it a critical player in regional security dynamics. Its drift towards Russia could compromise the West's ability to counterbalance Russian influence in the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus. This could lead to increased instability, affecting NATO's eastern flank and potentially closing off critical east-west routes and middle corridors between Russia and Iran, precisely like the Suwalki Corridor, vital for connecting the Baltic States to the rest of NATO.

## **Potential Consequences for Georgia**

A continuation of the current course will have severe and far-reaching consequences for Georgia. The most immediate impact will be the loss of critical support from Western allies, particularly the United States, which has been instrumental in providing financial aid, military training, and

intelligence support. American high officials have already stated that such "sanctions" are underway. Without this assistance, Georgia's defense capabilities could be significantly weakened, making it more vulnerable to external threats, especially from Russia. If the Europeans follow suit, as suggested by various EU leaders after the EU Foreign Affairs Council on 24 June, Georgia will remain without the essential military and state-building support.

## ***Georgia's disengagement from strategic partnerships with the West will further increase the risk of Russian military intervention.***

The prospect of re-integrating Abkhazia and South Ossetia, regions currently under Russian control, would become even more remote. The Georgian Dream's alignment with Russia nullifies any realistic chance of negotiating the return of these territories under Georgian sovereignty. Georgia, being aligned with Russia, will not be able to benefit even if Russia fails in Ukraine and will have to give away its occupied territories. Moreover, Georgia's disengagement from strategic partnerships with the West will further increase the risk of Russian military intervention, especially if the Georgian government continues to dismantle democratic institutions and suppress civil society. This could increase instability and potential conflict, further undermining Georgia's security and independence.

The reassessment of Georgia's strategic partnership with the United States carries severe implications for the country's defense capabilities. This reassessment will likely result in a complete halt of financial assistance from the US. However, the more critical impact will be the loss of access to essential military education, training, and equipment that have been the cornerstone of the development of the Georgian Armed Forces for decades.

Since Georgia gained independence, the US has been a crucial partner in developing its military capabilities. American financial aid, military training programs, and advanced equipment have transformed the Georgian Armed Forces into a more professional and capable entity. The US has provided comprehensive training programs encompassing combat tactics, strategic planning, logistics, and leadership development. These programs have been vital in ensuring that the Georgian military operates effectively and adheres to the standards of modern armed forces.

The education and training provided by the US have played a pivotal role in building a cadre of highly skilled officers and soldiers who can operate sophisticated equipment and execute complex military strategies. Losing access to these resources would significantly degrade the operational capabilities of the Georgian military. The sophisticated equipment supplied by the US, coupled with the technical training to use and maintain it, has been integral to Georgia's defense posture. Without ongoing support and the ability to procure and learn new technologies, the Georgian Armed Forces would face a steep decline in operational readiness and effectiveness.

Attempting to substitute US support with assistance from Georgia's new authoritarian allies, such as Russia, Iran, and China, is not a viable solution. These countries are not interested in developing Georgia's defense capabilities. Their support, if

any, would likely gear more towards establishing control over Georgia's defense sector rather than genuinely enhancing its military strength. Thus, the reassessment of Georgia's strategic partnership with the US, driven by the policies of the Georgian Dream, poses a significant threat to the country's defense capabilities, making Georgia even more vulnerable to external threats.

***The erosion of democratic institutions and the pivot away from Western alliances could lead to regional instability, weakening the rules-based international order.***

The current trajectory of the Georgian Dream government, marked by increased authoritarianism and alignment with Russia, poses a significant threat to both Georgia and the broader international community. The erosion of democratic institutions and the pivot away from Western alliances could lead to regional instability, weakening the rules-based international order. This path threatens the country's sovereignty, security, and democratic aspirations, potentially leaving the country isolated and vulnerable. It is imperative for Georgia's allies, particularly in the US, to actively support the nation's democratic forces and counter the authoritarian tide, ensuring that Georgia remains a sovereign, democratic state aligned with the principles of freedom and the rule of law ■