

A Turtle Without a Shell

Sergey Rastorguyev, a Russian political scientist, used a parable about a fox deceiving a little turtle into abandoning its shell to [explain](#) information warfare as the purposeful training of an enemy to remove its defenses. Applying this parable to Georgia, one can see a turtle handing over its defensive shell to an angry Russian bear.

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Over the last two decades, Russia has persistently undermined areas vital to Georgia's national defense and security. These actions include a military buildup in Georgia's occupied regions, notably the recent declaration by Russia to re-establish the [Ochamchire](#) naval base, the '[borderization](#)' of the occupied regions, kidnappings and murders along the occupation line, cyber-attacks, propaganda campaigns, and other [hybrid tactics](#). Paradoxically,

in response, the Georgian Dream government has imposed policies that have significantly weakened Georgia's national security instead of strengthening resilience.

Much like in Rastorguyev's parable, Georgia has reached a point where its leadership has purposefully degraded its defense capabilities to "avoid" irritating Russia. Steps taken by the Georgian Dream under Russian pressure include [severing](#) ties with NATO, suspending strategic projects like the [Anaklia](#) deep-sea port, degrading national security architecture and defense capabilities, and allowing the infiltration of critical strategic defense and security sectors.

Structural and Institutional Degradation

Georgia's national security architecture underwent significant transformation following constitutional changes initiated in 2009 and formalized in 2013. This shift transitioned the governance



SHOTA GVINERIA
Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010-14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.



model from a strong presidential system to a parliamentary one, thereby expanding the government's authority and assigning it the central role in national security planning and execution.

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The landscape further altered with the victory of the Georgian Dream in the October 2012 parliamentary elections. The change of power and subsequent political turbulence between outgoing and incoming governments, coupled with power struggles within the ruling party, have had profound implications for Georgia's national security architecture.

In early 2014, in addition to the National Security Council, which was subordinated to the President, the Government of Georgia created the State Security and Crisis Management Council as an advisory body to the Prime Minister. This move faced criticism from politicians and the expert community, who argued that the existence of two councils introduced problematic parallelism that hindered coherent national security policy planning.

Constitutional amendments adopted in 2018 brought further changes. It was announced that the National Security Council would be dissolved, making way for establishing a Defense Council. Unlike its predecessor, this new entity would convene solely in times of war, indicating a shift of focus toward crisis management. However, before the final abolition of the Security Council, the government decided to dissolve the State Security and Crisis Management Council by the end of 2017.

This move left a void in the formalized structure for national security planning and execution.

Although efforts were made to address this vacuum by establishing a State Security Council under a Prime Minister in 2019, critical conceptual documents essential to national security – such as threat assessments, national security concepts, or defense strategies – have not been formulated or updated in years.

These changes to Georgia's national security coordination mechanism showed a lack of a serious approach to safeguarding the nation's defense and security interests. Such volatility undermined the coherence and effectiveness of strategic planning, leaving Georgia vulnerable to well-pronounced or unforeseen threats and challenges.

Conceptual and Ideological Degradation

The structural and institutional degradation of the high-level coordination mechanism flashed out Bidzina Ivanishvili's strategic vision of Georgia, its role in a regional context, and relations with Russia. These ideas were exhibited in Ivanishvili's quotes below during a 2013 televised [interview](#), which became the basis for the so-called policy of 'normalizing' relations with Russia. In practice, as expected and warned by security experts, normalization materialized in a one-sided compromise on Georgia's national interests and [dragging](#) Georgia into Russia's orbit.

"I cannot believe that it is Russia's strategy to conquer and occupy neighboring countries."

"But in parallel to it, a question arises: is it possible to combine the restoration of friendly relations with Russia and at the same time to have good relations with NATO and to aspire towards NATO and to have good relations

with the United States and NATO-member states? I think that Armenia is a good example here; Armenia gives a good example for Georgia, and it can be a source of envy in a positive sense.”

“Armenia is on excellent terms with Russia and has friendly relations with [Russia] while also being on excellent terms with the United States and other NATO-member states. So I think it’s possible, and I think that we have to, and I believe that we will combine it.”

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Fast forward to Bidzina Ivanishvili’s [statements](#) of April 2024, and it becomes clear that the announced dramatic shift in Georgia’s foreign policy has already occurred. Ivanishvili openly embraced policies that are [not consistent](#) with Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspiration and its accession trajectory and will bring Georgia further away from the Western institutions and not closer. He endorsed conspiracy theories alleging that a “Global War Party” seeks to undermine Georgia’s identity and sovereignty and announced repressions against political opponents, free media, and civil society organizations after the October 2024 elections, framing all as agents of foreign influence. For the first time in history, a key policymaker openly declared the West as an enemy of Georgia and announced repressions against anyone opposing the Georgian Dream.

Ivanishvili’s statement served as policy guidance for an official policy change. Responding to [concerns](#) from the US embassy in Tbilisi, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [blamed](#) the US for violating the spirit of partnership by imposing unaccept-

able preconditions. Later, the Prime Minister [is-sued](#) a press release echoing Russia’s anti-Western propaganda and blaming the West for instigating color revolutions. At a briefing on 8 May, Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, [addressed](#) the ongoing protests against the “Foreign Agents’ Law” and announced that the Political Council of Georgian Dream has decided to create a database containing information on all individuals “*who are involved in violence, blackmail, threats, and other illegal acts, threats, and blackmail,*” or “*who publicly endorse these actions.*” This statement led to violence against opposition figures and activists.

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Isolating Georgia from the West is a long-standing strategic goal for Russia. The Georgian Dream’s policies, rhetoric, and actions have created enormous opportunities for Russia to manipulate and jeopardize Georgia’s national security. As a result, Georgia is the most exposed country in the volatile security environment of this turbulent region. Strategic engagement of Western stakeholders is crucial for safeguarding Georgia’s vital interests and mitigating mounting security threats and risks, given the grave vulnerabilities created by the Georgian Dream’s accommodating policies and [growing](#) dependence on Russia. It is clear that if Russia and its local proxies succeed in isolating Georgia from its Western partners, the country will face existential challenges not only to its national security but to its statehood more broadly.

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Russian Infiltration

One major result of the Georgian Dream's defense and security policy is the extensive infiltration of strategic sectors by Russia-affiliated actors. Over the past few years, Georgia's state security apparatus has seen a significant drain of Western-educated professionals. Numerous individuals have resigned and been dismissed from political and public positions due to their critical views on the Georgian Dream's pro-Russian drift. Moreover, scandals involving individuals with clear links to Moscow being active in Georgia's political, economic, and even defense affairs have become commonplace.

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In 2016, the Chief of the Joint Staff, General Gigi Kalandadze, [revealed](#) on the Rustavi2 TV channel that crucial military facilities' coordinates and classified information were handed over to Russian special services after the August 2008 war. The breach included firing points and central command headquarters vital for Georgian defense against Russian aggression. This alarming revelation underscored the degradation of national defense and compromised security infrastructure. The handover was allegedly conducted by a former military officer, Tristan Tsitelashvili, who was released as a political prisoner by Georgian Dream in 2013. Later, Defense Minister Mindia Janelidze practically [admitted](#) the breach and that Tsitelashvili indeed entered the closed facility, but the incident was downgraded to minor misconduct, and no investigation followed.

Former Chief Prosecutor of Georgia, Otar Partskhaladze, who now holds Russian citizenship and resides in Moscow, has been a close ally of Ivan-

ishvili and the Georgian Dream leadership. He had accumulated considerable wealth during and after his tenure, significantly [increasing](#) his property holdings limited to two items before entering politics to 24 actual listings. Partskhaladze was sanctioned in 2023 by the US Government for influencing Georgian society for the benefit of Russia and collaborating with the Russian Federal Security Service. Georgian Dream officials have staunchly defended him, but no official investigations have been initiated.

The so-called cartographers' [case](#) was used to influence the 2020 elections. The Georgian Dream arrested two experts from the Ministries of Foreign and Internal Affairs, blaming them and the Saakashvili government for handing over a disputed border area near the David Gareji Monastery to Azerbaijan. A pivotal role in this case was played by Davit Khidasheli, a businessman with close [ties](#) to Moscow, who served as an adviser to the defense minister from 2020 to 2024. Khidasheli procured maps in Russia that purportedly evidenced territorial concessions. However, these alleged concessions turned out to be nonexistent, leading to the collapse of the prosecutor's case against the accused civil servants due to insufficient evidence. Despite this, the Georgian Dream used the case for manipulating nationalist sentiments before the 2020 elections, demonizing the opposition and civil society.

Furthermore, investigative journalists in Ukraine and Georgia have [revealed](#) unsettling ties between Russia and the Georgian strategic defense industry. After severe sanctions on Russia's defense industry following its full-scale attack on Ukraine and Georgia's refusal to help Ukraine, a disturbing depth of infiltration was exposed. The intertwining of Tamaz Somkhishvili's business interests with Tbilisi Aviation Plant, holding shares and operating within the confines of the Sukhoi Aircraft Manufacturing Company, and the adjacent company TAM Management working on military repairs was

revealed. Public registry records showed Somkhishvili's company maintaining a Moscow representative office and being involved in contacts directly or indirectly affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defense. Somkhishvili's past roles in prominent Russian companies like *Lukoil* and *Rosneftexport*, coupled with his Russian citizenship confirmed by Ukrainian Defense Intelligence, further fuel concerns. These revelations underscored the urgent need for transparency and vigilant measures against malign influence from Russia-linked entities within critical defense infrastructure.

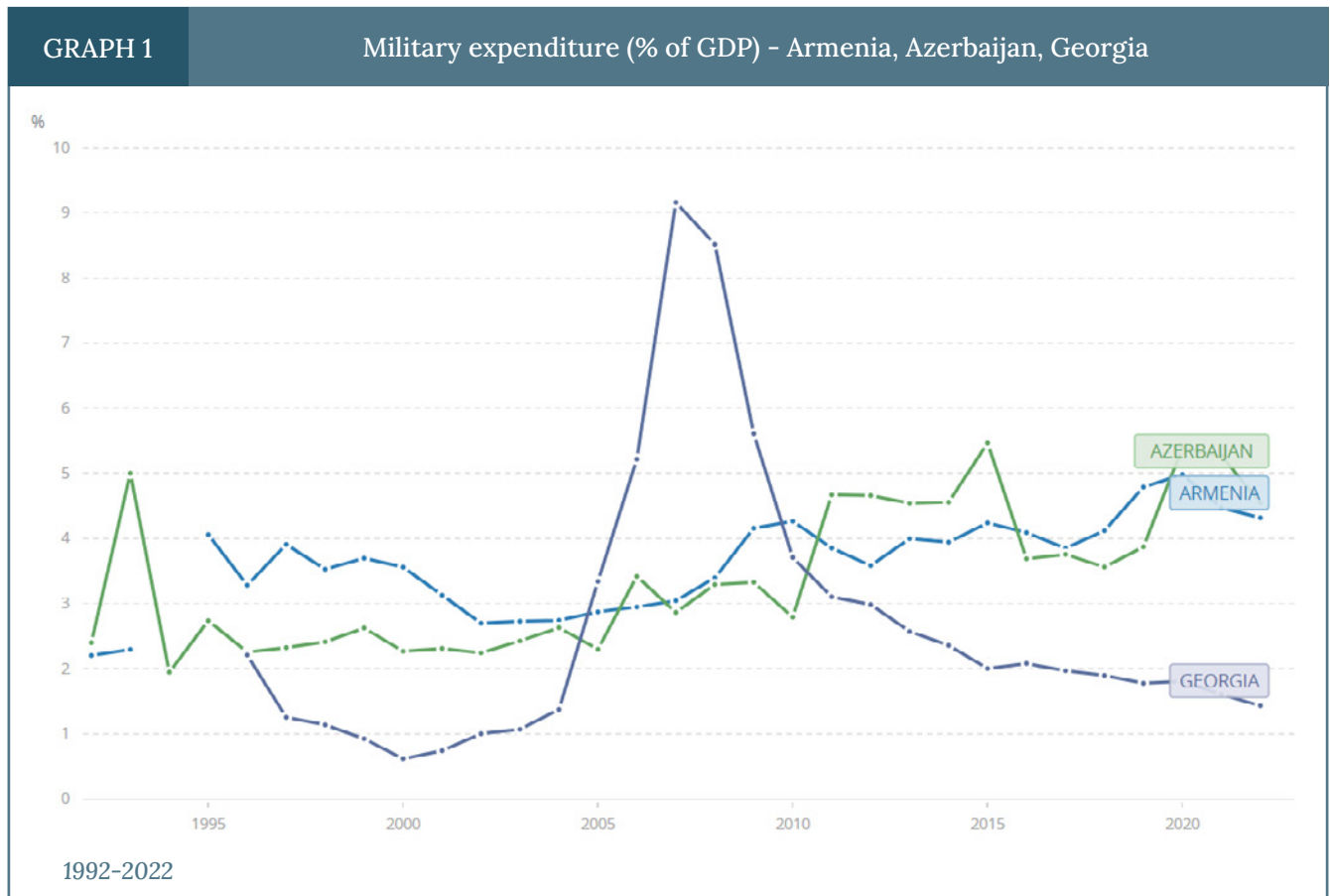
Drained Funding and Capabilities

Another grave concern is Georgia's drastically declining defense spending, which poses a significant risk amid a rapidly deteriorating security environment in the region. The total defense budget

in 2022 amounted to a mere USD 360 mln, representing only 1.43% of the GDP, a drastic plunge from 2.98% in 2012. For comparison, in 2022, Armenia spent 4.35% of GDP on defense, amounting to USD 795 mln, while Azerbaijan's defense budget totaled almost USD 3 bln, representing 14.95% of the GDP. The alarmingly deteriorating [trend](#) of regional imbalance, undermining Georgia's national security, is evident in the data (see below graph 1).

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Moreover, a closer look at Georgia's defense spending structure reveals an even more concerning imbalance. In 2021, nearly 87% of the total budget allocated for defense programs (USD 305 mil-



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lion) was [directed](#) toward management and social programs, with only 3% allotted for infrastructure development and a mere 10% for maintenance and enhancement of defense capabilities.

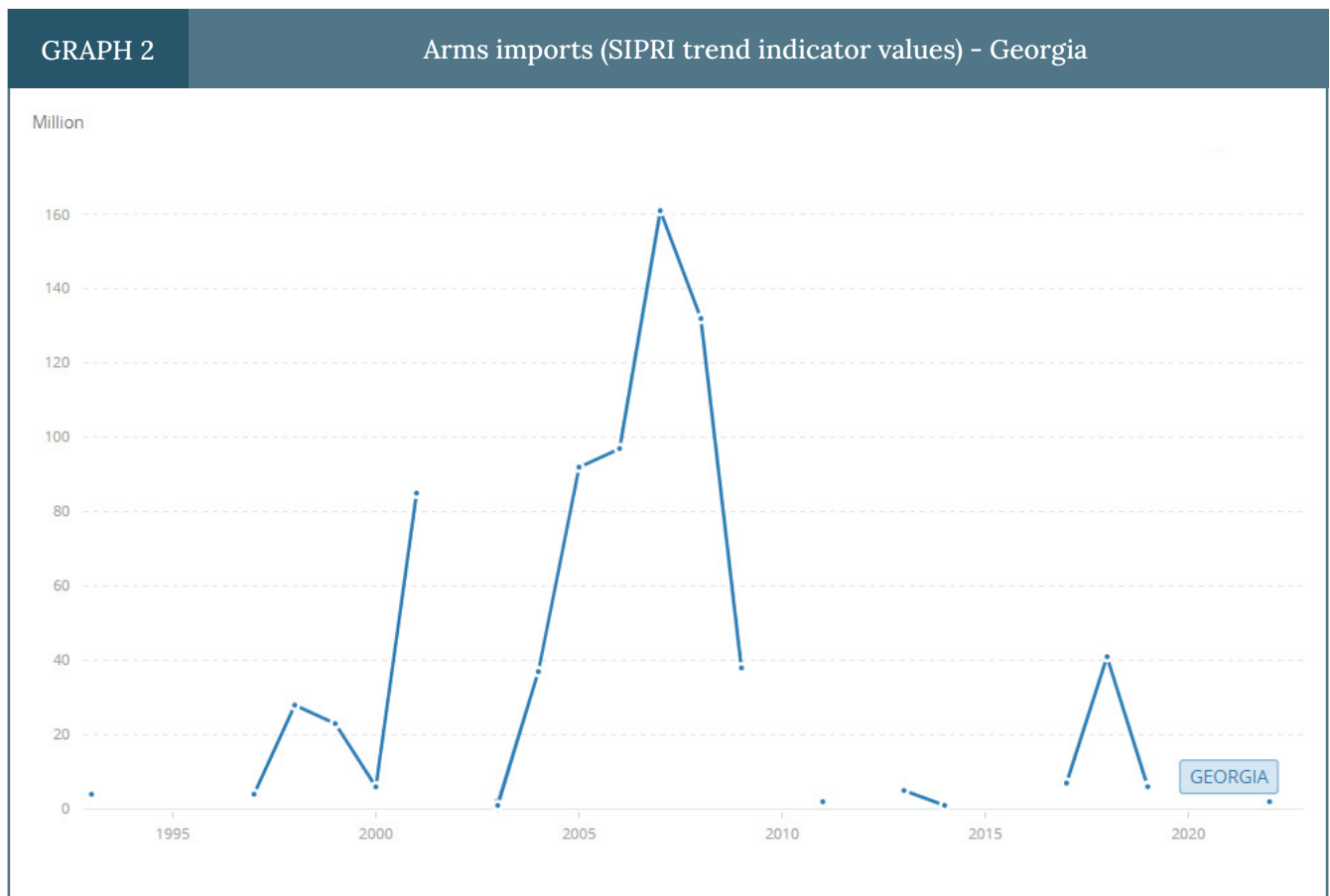
Graph 2 highlights the near absence of arms acquisition until 2017, attributed to the reluctance of partners to sell weapon systems to Georgia following the Russian aggression in 2008. However, the decision by the US to provide Javelin anti-tank missiles to Georgia briefly spurred arms acquisition in 2018, reaching up to USD 40 million, otherwise plummeting below USD 10 million before and after this period. These insufficient funds underscore the disregard for defense by the Georgian Dream government, posing a significant threat to the country's national security.

One specific example of the leadership of the Georgian Dream sabotaging Georgia's defense development is the air defense deal between Georgia

and France. While it was heralded as a step forward in bolstering the country's defense capabilities, it remains clouded in controversy. Despite Defense Minister Tina Khidasheli finally [signing](#) the agreement with *ThalesRaytheonSystems* in 2015, critical details such as the system's type and cost were deliberately obscured, perpetuating an environment of secrecy.

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Former Defense Minister Irakli Alasania's startling [claim](#) that Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili and former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili sabotaged the deal at Russia's behest underscores concerns about the Georgian Dream's commit-



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ment to national security. Alasania's dismissal and subsequent accusations reignited a political crisis, raising suspicions of Russia's covert influence over Tbilisi's arms procurements from the West. Despite denials from the current government and the French embassy, the murky circumstances surrounding the deal's collapse highlight a troubling pattern of interference and opacity, leaving questions about the true motives and allegiances of Georgian Dream's leadership.

Drifting Toward the North

While the war in Ukraine continues to consume the full attention of Western stakeholders, the Georgian Dream doubles down on its open drift toward the Russian orbit. Russian-style disinformation and propaganda campaigns targeting all active opponents of pro-Russian policies have intensified, especially after a constant wave of pro-democracy protests hit Tbilisi in response to the government's effort to impose a Russian-style law on foreign agents. Law enforcement agencies have shown brutal aggression against peaceful protesters, with beatings and illegal detentions becoming regular practices. The Georgian Dream has irrevocably chosen to impose absolute authoritarian rule at all costs. From this perspective, the deliberate degradation of Georgia's national interests, as well as the resilience of the defense and security fabric, can be seen as a logical course of

action for a government aiming to maintain power by using law enforcement as a politicized tool for repression.

Escalated disengagement and demonstrative turn away from Georgia's strategic Western partners create a staggering illusion to the Georgian Dream willingly handing over the nation's defensive shell to the Russian Federation.

On the other hand, the threat from Russia has also grown considerably. If the Kremlin decides it is in Russia's interests to escalate tensions in the region further, the pro-Russian policies of the Georgian Dream will not deter further Russian aggression. In this context, completely degrading Georgia's deterrence and defense capabilities poses a fundamental national security threat. This threat is multiplied by the degradation of another potential deterrent—Georgia's strategic partnership with the West—putting the country in existential danger. There is an ever-growing risk of Russia taking advantage of Georgia's exposure and vulnerability to finalize its subjugation to Russia's exclusive sphere of influence during these turbulent regional and internal times. Escalated disengagement and demonstrative turn away from Georgia's strategic Western partners create a staggering illusion to the Georgian Dream willingly handing over the nation's defensive shell to the Russian Federation ■