

Georgian People vs. Russian Dream

Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution states that “the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.”

On 28 May 2024, the ruling Georgian Dream party overcame the presidential veto and finally adopted the law “on the transparency of foreign influence”, inspired by the Russian law on foreign agents. The end goal of this law is to eradicate any critical voices from the NGOs and media. This happened five months before the general elections scheduled for 26 October 2024.

When evaluating this move of the ruling Georgian Dream party, the European Union was crystal clear - European Council President Charles Michel [assessed](#) the bill as “not consistent with Georgia’s EU aspiration and its accession trajectory...” which would bring Georgia further away from the EU. High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Euro-

pean Commission, Josep Borrell, and Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, also issued a joint [statement](#) stressing that adoption of the law “would negatively impact Georgia’s progress on its EU path” and that this law “is not in line with EU core norms and values.” The Venice Commission also strongly recommended [repealing](#) the law.

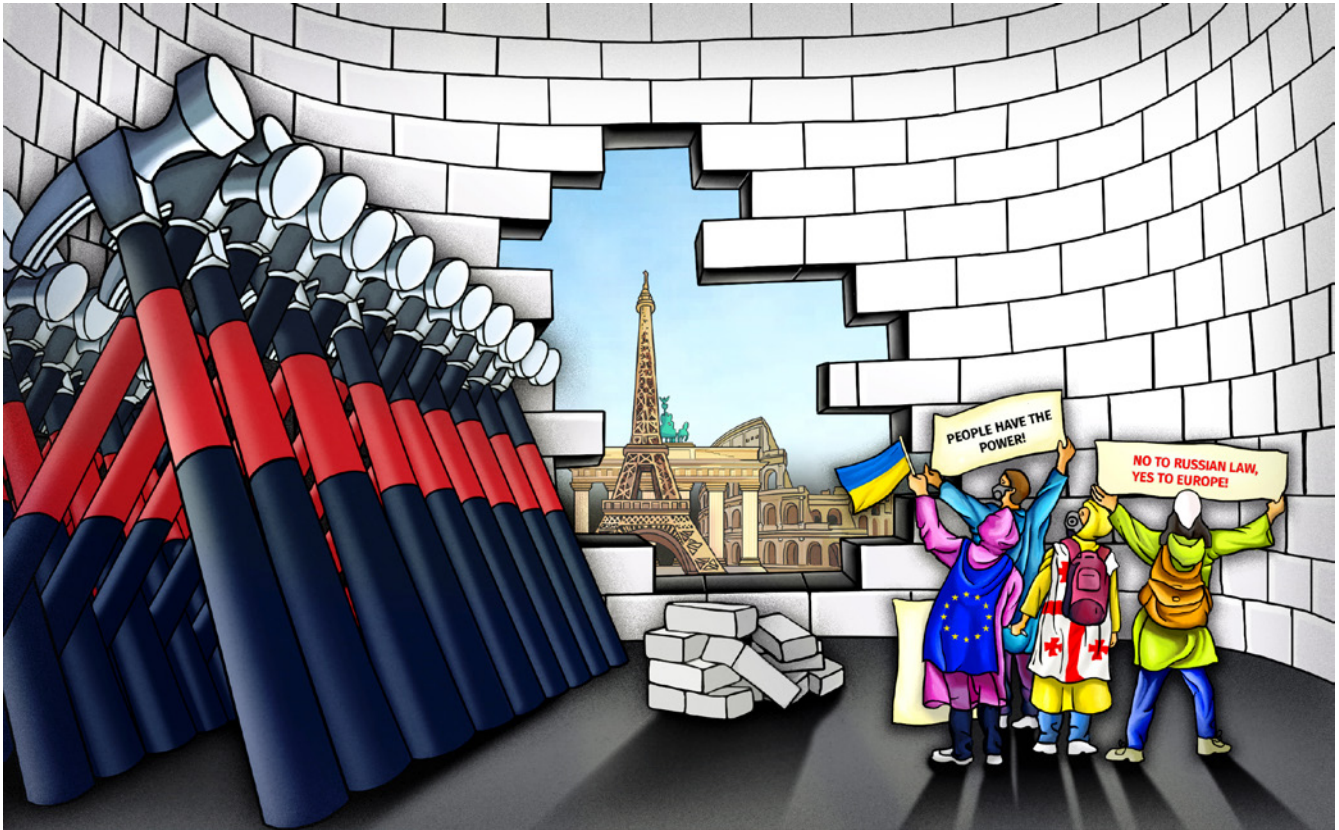
The rhetoric of the Georgian Dream throughout April and May was clear and straightforward: the European Union was accused of infringing on Georgia’s sovereignty, and the “Global War Party” was alleged to be trying to drag Georgia into war.

The bill’s reintroduction was followed by statements from the honorary chair of the ruling party, Bidzina [Ivanishvili](#), the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli [Kobakhidze](#), and the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#). They all unveiled what the GD has been trying to hide for quite some time – Georgian authorities decided to make a U-turn and go against the



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Constitution. The rhetoric of the Georgian Dream throughout April and May was clear and straightforward: the European Union was accused of infringing on Georgia's sovereignty, and the "Global War Party" was alleged to be trying to drag Georgia into war. The Prime Minister of Georgia even scandalously [accused](#) EU Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi of threatening to assassinate him as had purportedly happened to Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico.

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the Georgian Dream must, among other things, organize free, fair, and competitive elections; implement de-oligarchization, reform the judiciary, ensure the rule of law, combat elite corruption, and align Georgia's foreign and security policies with those of the European Union. However, fulfilling these nine steps would mean the Georgian Dream undermining its foundation of power.

The Georgian Dream's hold on power is maintained through a judiciary controlled by a corrupt group of judges, three of whom have been sanctioned by the US State Department for corruption. The Ministry of the Interior is led by a former bodyguard of Mr. Ivanishvili. Riot police and special task forces have been using brutal force to attack peaceful protesters and stifle dissent. The Prosecutor's Office of Georgia is another tool used by the Georgian Dream to persecute political opponents and anyone who opposes the regime. Former Prosecutor General Otar Partskhaladze was sanctioned by the US State Department for his ties with the Russian FSB and for influencing Georgian society and politics in favor of Russia. Loyalty within the

Ministry of Defense is another foundation of the Georgian Dream's power. David Khidasheli, a close associate of sanctioned Russian tycoon Vladimir Yevtushenko, served as Adviser to the Georgian Defense Minister from 2020 to February 2024. The Georgian Dream also relies heavily on state institutions and the media that disseminate anti-Western narratives and disinformation. In May 2023, a Meta [report](#) revealed that the Strategic Communications Department of the Government Administration of Georgia conducted a coordinated campaign against protesters opposing the Russian-style "foreign agents' law". In contrast, the EU has called for reforms in these pillars of power, a task that has proven self-defeating for Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream.

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Georgia's society is now confronting a complete state capture by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose personal wealth constitutes nearly one-third of Georgia's GDP. As this journal has documented on multiple occasions, his interests exert substantial influence over the country's decision-making process.

EU Accession – Genuine Will that GD Never Had

The ruling Georgian Dream party has never been genuinely interested in the EU accession process. Few believed their 2020 pre-election pledge to submit a membership application to the EU in 2024, viewing it as merely a tactic to attract pro-European voters ahead of the Parliamentary elections. The Georgian Dream was [opposed](#) to applying for membership even in March 2022,

following Ukraine's application and Moldova's declaration of intent to follow suit. The government only changed its stance within 24 hours under public pressure and street protests demanding that the application be submitted.

The EU's response to Georgia's membership application, which usually takes years, was swift and unexpected. Within three months, the Georgian Dream received a response indicating that, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia needed to fulfill 12 recommendations before being granted candidate status. The Chairman of Georgian Dream attributed this failure to Georgia's geographical distance from the EU, [stating](#) that "*geographical position also prevented Georgia from obtaining the status.*" The EU's decision put the Georgian Dream in a difficult position: they had to either openly oppose EU integration or fulfill the 12 recommendations, risking the loss of power due to their reliance on a loyal judiciary system, lack of transparency, and endemic corruption. The Georgian Dream's leadership opted for a middle path, addressing only the low-hanging fruits rather than conducting genuine reforms.

Consequently, only three of the 12 recommendations were fulfilled, allowing the Georgian Dream to maintain grip on the essential pillars of its power, without reforming them per EU request. At the end of 2023, the EU granted candidate status to Georgia, emphasizing that the decision was primarily motivated by the pro-European will of the Georgian people. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [stressed](#) while presenting the enlargement package, the EU "*supports the genuine aspirations of the overwhelming majority of its citizens to join the European Union. These aspirations need to be better mirrored by the authorities who should engage more with the opposition and civil society on matters of national interest.*"

This EU decision was yet again exploited by the Georgian Dream. It allowed the ruling party to

validate its free-riding strategy and demonstrate, particularly to its pro-European voters, that it could advance on the EU path without significant reforms. This move also diluted the argument that the Georgian Dream is pro-Russian. Simultaneously, granting candidate status without merit [reduced](#) the EU's strong and effective leverage over the Georgian Dream.

Full Speed Towards Authoritarianism

The state capture and the Georgian Dream's push towards authoritarianism did not occur overnight. It has been a gradual process, often escaping the EU's attention or being met with inconsistent policies and messaging. Given Georgia's status as a frontrunner of the Eastern Partnership, some severe democratic deficiencies were either easily forgiven or quickly forgotten. In 2017, Azerbaijani investigative journalist Afgan Mukhtarli was allegedly abducted in Tbilisi, transferred to Baku, and sentenced to six years in prison. The European External Action Service issued [statements](#), and the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) urging Georgian authorities to “ensure a prompt, thorough, transparent and effective investigation into Afgan Mukhtarli's forced disappearance in Georgia and illegal transfer to Azerbaijan and to bring the perpetrators to justice.” Seven years later, no one has been brought to justice.

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During the 2018 presidential elections, Ivanishvili announced a debt relief program amounting to GEL 1.5 billion (approximately EUR 500 million)

for 600,000 individuals. According to the OSCE ODIHR election observation mission's [report](#), “it was considered by a number of ODIHR EOM interlocutors to be forms of vote buying, a practice prohibited by the Election and Criminal Codes.”

In 2019, the ruling Georgian Dream party [violated](#) the European Convention on Human Rights by violently dispersing an anti-occupation rally outside the Parliament building. The protest erupted after Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian communist MP, addressed the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy session from the Speaker's seat in the Georgian Parliament.

The ruling party regularly violates the peaceful assembly of minority groups, as evidenced by the Georgian Dream's encouragement of far-right groups to deliberately attack participants of Tbilisi Pride in 2021 and 2023. Since then, the government has [failed](#) to bring the perpetrators and instigators of the violence to justice.

Despite warnings from the US Administration and EU and the [opinion](#) of the Venice Commission, the ruling party appointed judges to the Supreme Court of Georgia for lifetime appointments, raising concerns about their impartiality and qualifications. This resulted in Georgia losing the EU's micro-financial [assistance](#) of EUR 75 million, which was conditioned on judicial reform.

In 2021, it was revealed that the Georgia Security Service was allegedly spying on then-EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell, US diplomats, Israeli Ambassador Ran Gidor, and employees of other diplomatic missions in Georgia. The prosecution is still awaiting the results of internal investigations within the State Security Service.

In 2022, the Georgian Dream worsened the Criminal Procedure Code by extending the list of crimes under which covert investigative measures are allowed. The president's veto and the negative opin-

ion tabled by the Venice Commission did not stop Georgian Dream from enforcing the law. Given the lack of effective parliamentary oversight over the security services, this law drastically deteriorated Georgia's human rights standing.

Regarding foreign policy, instead of engaging with the EU, the Georgian Dream sought closer ties with China, culminating in the signing of a Strategic Partnership [deal](#) in 2023, starting [visa free](#) travel with China in 2024 and just recently [awarding](#) the construction of the strategic Anaklia deep sea port to a Chinese state owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). Simultaneously, the Georgian Dream engaged with the pro-Russian leadership of Hungary, hoping it could protect their interests at the EU level. As part of this strategy, Georgian Dream leaders regularly attend the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) annual gatherings in Budapest and criticize liberal values.

The Georgian Dream also refused to provide political support to Ukraine following Russia's unjustified and unprovoked war. Additionally, it decided to resume direct flights with Russia, contradicting the alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as required by the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. As part of their policy of appeasing Russia, family members of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who are sanctioned by the USA and EU, were allowed to visit Georgia.

A Wall

Six months have passed since the EU granted candidate status to Georgia with nine prerequisites proposed to open accession negotiations. At least

five of these steps were already included in the EU's 12 recommendations before granting candidate status and still need to be fulfilled. Since November 2023, the Georgian Dream has made no progress to ensure that Georgia advances on its EU path. So far, none of the steps have been [fulfilled](#). Instead, the Georgian Dream passed a Russian-style law on foreign agents and imposed terror on citizens who opposed it and sought a European future. The Georgian Dream, which came to power in 2012 promising justice restoration and closer ties with the EU, is now acting in Russia's best interests. It has all but erected a wall between the Georgian people and the EU.

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With the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, the Georgian Dream has reached a point of no return. It has lost the trust of its citizens and international partners, aligning with Kremlin and friends of Russia and becoming isolated from the global community. The European Union needs to move from words to actions and demonstrate its support for the aspirations of the Georgian people by sanctioning those decision-makers who undermine Georgia's European path and are engaged in corruption and state capture. The EU must also provide a clear update on how the adoption of this law and implementation of the nine conditions affects Georgia's candidate status and opening of the accession talks. General elections scheduled on 26 October 2024 are poised to be a genuine test for Georgia to either continue its European path or become Russia's backyard ■