

# Europe's Need for an Urgent Paradigm Shift to Keep Georgia and Moldova from Russia's Influence

**T**here was a time when political life in Georgia and Moldova was dominated by the personalities of two oligarchs: Bidzina Ivanishvili and Vlad Plahotniuk. At a Paris conference dedicated to a comparative analysis of the two cases with my Moldovan colleague, I joked, borrowing an Odessite funny story, when a cheated woman, while seeing the mistress of her husband's friend, exclaims: "But ours is better!" I remember saying then to my friend that "our" oligarch was "better." His wealth was greater, his capture of the Georgian state was more complete and comprehensive, and his links to Russia were more ancient and solid.

Today, Plahotniuk is no longer around. A succession of other oligarchs (Ilan Shor, Vyacheslav Platon) who have taken up the pro-Russian torch in Moldova were defeated by pro-European forces in the referendum and successive presidential elec-

tions. It was challenging, but nonetheless, there was defeat. By contrast, Ivanishvili is still firmly entrenched in Georgia and has just successfully organized a large-scale electoral fraud, mobilizing all the structures of the state machinery to this end.

***Georgia, which has had no diplomatic relations with Russia since 2008, has an explicitly pro-Russian government receiving encouragement and applause from Moscow officials and Kremlin propagandists.***

This notwithstanding, many paradoxes are in place. From its independence and before the Georgian Dream's (GD) ascend to power, Georgia has always been aligned with the West, including expressing a will to become a NATO member. On



**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 Researcher at Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Paris SciencesPo (2005).

the other hand, Moldova has seen a constant alternation of pro-Russian and pro-Western forces and has never claimed a NATO membership objective. Opinion polls show that over 80% of Georgians want their country to join the EU, while Moldovans are less enthusiastic about the union. This is despite Moldova's foreign trade being much more closely [linked](#) to the EU than Georgia's. In addition, Georgia, which has had no diplomatic relations with Russia since 2008, has an explicitly pro-Russian government receiving encouragement and applause from Moscow officials and Kremlin propagandists. Moldova's Maia Sandu, meanwhile, has become the *bête noire* of the Russian media and the Kremlin. However, Moldova still has diplomatic ties with Moscow and even held elections in Russia for Moldovan expats.

Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine are frontline countries. Moscow seeks to achieve the same objective in all three states: with "hybrid" methods in the first two cases and kinetic and bloody warfare in the last. Pressure on Chisinau and Tbilisi has increased significantly since the start of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine and the return of the enlargement issue to the European agenda. At this stage, the Kremlin has taken a setback in Moldova but is holding firm in Georgia.

## State Capture as a Decisive Variable

In addition to many similarities, such as their similar Soviet past, their status as EU candidate countries, comparable demographics, the existence of separatist conflicts fomented by Moscow as early as the 1990s, and *de facto* territorial entities occupied by the Russian army, Moldova and Georgia also have some notable differences.

The key and decisive difference is that, in Georgia, the state apparatus has been taken over by a pro-Russian political force, the Georgian Dream

party, whereas Moldova managed to escape state capture. Moldova's path to recovery began with Maia Sandu's victory in the 2020 presidential election and the pro-European PAS party's win in 2021. This alone was not enough, as the country has since faced intense pressure from Russia, including energy sabotage, cyber-attacks, multi-million-dollar funding of anti-European forces, fake news, and propaganda. Nevertheless, state control (except in Gagauzia and certain districts) remained largely beyond Russia's reach, making Moscow's objectives more difficult to achieve. In contrast, the Georgian Dream's hold over Georgia since October 2012 and the steady consolidation of power within state institutions greatly facilitated its success in the 2024 elections.

***After Moldova's first round of presidential elections and referendum, Sandu accused "criminal groups working with foreign forces" of attempting to buy 300,000 votes.***

Russia attempted an overt hostile takeover in Moldova, visible even at the surface level. Gaining power from the outside tends to be more blatant than maintaining it from within, as institutional control allows for more subtlety, as seen in Georgia. In October 2023, Maia Sandu [exposed](#) a plot by Russia's Wagner paramilitary group to overthrow her. Moldovan police uncovered a network of over a hundred young men trained in Russia, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina's Republika Srpska to incite post-election unrest. Such aggressive tactics were not needed in Georgia. After Moldova's first round of presidential elections and referendum, Sandu accused "criminal groups working with foreign forces" of [attempting to buy](#) 300,000 votes. In some regions, Russian payment cards were widely distributed to the population.

But what about Georgia? Why are international observers not emphasizing the "Russian meddling"

there, even though President Salome Zourabichvili has [described](#) it as a “Russian special operation?”

## Is Russia Outsourcing to GD?

**Georgia has not been any more resilient than Moldova against propaganda portraying Europe and the West as destabilizing forces labeled as “the Global War Party,” pushing moral degradation, destroying traditional and family values, and forcefully imposing same-sex marriage.**

Despite Chisinau’s ban on Russian TV broadcasts, Russia maintains a robust network of Russian-language media outlets in Moldova that promote narratives favoring Kremlin interests. Russian-language media is much less prevalent in Georgia, with Russian TV broadcasts taken off the air in 2008 after the Russian invasion. However, Georgia has not been any more resilient than Moldova against propaganda portraying Europe and the West as destabilizing forces labeled as “the Global War Party,” pushing moral degradation, destroying traditional and family values, and forcefully imposing same-sex marriage.

Unlike in Moldova, in Georgia, this disinformation was primarily spread by Georgian-language media outlets linked to the ruling party. Channels like Imedi, Rustavi2, PosTV, and the Georgian Public Broadcaster disseminated Russian-aligned propaganda in Georgian without overtly referencing Russia. This approach proved more effective than if it had been presented in Russian. The same pattern extends to social media manipulation on platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Telegram. In May 2023, Meta [removed](#) dozens of Georgian government accounts, pages, and groups for “coordinated inauthentic behavior,” a term essentially referring to spreading fake news. Notably,

these accounts were linked to the government’s Stratcom, which had received significant European and American taxpayer funding.

**Every statement from Moscow in support of the Georgian Dream only deepened mistrust among a substantial part of the electorate, making such endorsements undesirable. The only acceptable context for referencing the “big northern neighbor” was in discussions of “peace.”**

Russia remained noticeably absent from Georgian Dream’s messaging, likely due to a tactical decision to avoid mentioning the country by name. Instead, pro-government propaganda concentrated on criticizing Europe rather than glorifying Putin’s regime. Any overt reference to Russia would have complicated matters for the Georgian Dream, as the Kremlin is widely unpopular among Georgian voters. Every statement from Moscow in support of the Georgian Dream only deepened mistrust among a substantial part of the electorate, making such endorsements undesirable. The only acceptable context for referencing the “big northern neighbor” was in discussions of “peace.” Given that Russia evokes both negative feelings and fear in a Georgian population still traumatized by the conflicts of the early 1990s and 2008, the Georgian Dream positioned itself as the sole guarantor of peace with Moscow.

The Georgian Dream’s control over the bureaucratic apparatus gave it a significant advantage over pro-Russian forces in Moldova. By fully controlling the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and having influence over the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), the Georgian Dream restricted the Georgian diaspora’s voting rights, systematically refusing to open sufficient polling stations abroad despite petitions from citizens outside Georgia.

In both Georgia and Moldova, the diaspora vote overwhelmingly supported pro-European forces (over 80%). Roughly 700,000 to 800,000 Moldovan and Georgian citizens abroad are eligible to vote. Yet, the Moldovan CEC opened 231 polling stations abroad, while the Georgian CEC only opened 67. This disparity explains Moldova's much higher diaspora turnout: 328,000 Moldovans (19.5% of total voters) voted compared to just 34,000 Georgians (1.6%). Diaspora votes were critical in Moldova, contributing to Sandu's presidential run-off victory and the referendum's pro-European "yes" vote. Joint sabotage by the Georgian Foreign Ministry and the CEC played a vital role in the GD's record score in these elections. It had a double effect: it reduced the number of votes for the opposition and increased that of the ruling party. Indeed, numerous reports submitted by NGOs and opposition observers point to the GD's [massive use](#) of the identity cards/identification numbers of emigrants not registered with Georgian consulates in their countries of residence and unable to return to the country on polling day.

State capture provided the Georgian Dream with invaluable tools to skew the fairness of elections. Every ministry and state agency was mobilized to deliver personal data on nearly every Georgian voter, giving the ruling party exclusive access to its advantage.

For instance, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs supplied lists of social aid recipients, participants in state medication programs, public health insurance applicants, substitution treatment program enrollees, and cancer patients. With this confidential information, the Georgian Dream tailored its campaign to individual needs, effectively commodifying votes. Voters were offered services precisely aligned with their needs, such as assistance with medication purchases, childcare, or Methadone distribution for individuals in addiction treatment programs. Penitentiary administration and the Ministry of Justice could provide

the complete list of probationers, the list of people serving their sentences in penal institutions, the nature of their offenses, and the length of their sentences. As the sole repository of this information, the GD was able to offer families amnesties and reduced sentences in exchange for votes. The people concerned, their families, and relatives were encouraged to cast their ballots for GD and become GD "coordinators" and electoral activists. The "special relationship" that law enforcement structures have with the criminal world was also put to good use to help the GD win: the neighborhood "petty thugs" could intimidate opposition voters in exchange for impunity for their crimes, drug deals, and daily incivilities.

The Ministry of Justice, along with Public Service Houses—once a hallmark of the previous government—and the border police, compiled a list of Georgian citizens abroad who had not registered with consulates, preventing them from voting on-site. The Georgian Dream exploited this pool of votes by organizing repeated voting through party loyalists or paid participants. According to some involved, the most "efficient" individuals voted up to 22 times at various polling stations nationwide.

Moreover, the judiciary, fully submissive to political influence, routinely dismisses electoral violation complaints from NGOs or opposition parties, with only a few courageous judges standing out. Yet even these cases face a dead end in higher courts, leaving opposition complaints with [no chance of success](#).

Numerous examples showcase, how the school and kindergarten teachers, often unqualified and failing state exams, were pressured into aiding falsification efforts in polling station commissions. Some neglected to apply invisible ink to prevent double voting, while others overlooked mismatched identity documents. Additionally, the Georgian Dream created tens of thousands of fictitious public service jobs in the lead-up to elec-

tions, presenting them as acts of charity—a classic example of [“using administrative resources.”](#)

The pro-Russian GD’s control of Georgia’s state apparatus spared Moscow the need for direct interference, which would have been more overt than in Moldova. This indirect approach was even more effective since apparent Russian meddling might have alarmed Georgian voters.

## What Lessons for Europe?

The Georgian Dream has transformed Georgia’s elections and much of its political landscape into a kind of vast marketplace—the primary chance for the country’s impoverished, intimidated, and marginalized population to receive any form of aid from the state. Elections have ceased to be a moment of choosing a political, ideological, economic, or geopolitical direction; instead, they have become opportunities to distribute goods in cash, food, medicine, debt relief, and other essentials.

***Elections have ceased to be a moment of choosing a political, ideological, economic, or geopolitical direction; instead, they have become opportunities to distribute goods in cash, food, medicine, debt relief, and other essentials.***

The ruling party’s non-material messaging is minimal and largely negative, centered around fears it has previously cultivated: fear of war (with campaign posters [showing](#) destroyed Ukrainian cities contrasted with peaceful Georgian ones) and fear of the erosion of traditional family and gender roles (Bidzina Ivanishvili ominously referenced the “threat” of [male milk](#) replacing female milk in his last pre-election interview).

So, how should Europe and the West respond? European interest in the 2024 Moldovan and Georgian elections was high, particularly given the

context: these were the first elections since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the granting of EU candidate status to both countries.

Yet Europe’s interest, resources, and efforts still lag behind Moscow’s intense drive to intervene. There remains a constant threat that Russia is more invested in the EU’s eastern neighborhood—including candidate countries—than Brussels itself. European leaders like Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borrell have expressed strong support for the European aspirations of Moldova and Georgia, speaking of a historic chance for these countries to join the [next wave](#) of EU enlargement by 2030 if they maintain their reform momentum. These are indeed historic declarations driven by the geopolitical shifts brought on by the war in Ukraine. Just a few years ago, Kyiv, Chisinau, and Tbilisi could only dream of such opportunities. But Russia, even while bogged down in Ukraine, sees this as the time to advance its vision of a soon-to-be-restored empire.

Russia spares no effort in deploying subversion, hybrid warfare, disinformation, and constructing a distorted reality. Europe, meanwhile, has begun to respond but often remains one step behind. As democracies rooted in legality and transparency, EU responses are typically defensive, aimed at countering Russian tactics with moderate success but seldom through proactive measures.

Europe’s approach to Russia’s coercive diplomacy, blackmail, intimidation, destabilization, and corruption tends to rely on a positive agenda (reform assistance, financial aid, credits for infrastructure, and health and education programs). When Ursula von der Leyen visited Chisinau two weeks before the election, she announced a EUR 1.8 billion [“growth plan”](#) to support Moldova’s economy. This was an unprecedented commitment but likely had little immediate impact on the referendum outcome, as it seemed abstract to many impoverished Moldovans grappling with a crisis, especially





© GEOPOLITICS

compared to the tangible EUR 100–150 in cash offered by Russian-backed sources. The same aspect played a role in the choice of thousands of Georgians who were more attracted by tangible money distributed by the GD coordinators than the prospect of a distant bright future as citizens of prospective EU member states.

Additionally, the EU has traditionally been reluctant to “influence the vote” in other countries, even where it has strategic interests. This is beginning to shift. Although the European Commission withheld the release of a country report on enlargement days before the vote—fearing it might appear as election interference—the EU ambassador in Tbilisi eventually moved beyond his original stance of “not babysitting Georgia.” He [cautioned](#) about the repercussions if elections were rigged or if laws contradicting EU principles, such as the “foreign agents” and “LGBT propaganda” laws, were not rescinded. Yet, this had little impact on

the Georgian Dream’s campaign, which stoked fears of imminent war to sway voters.

## Need for Radical Changes

***The EU must recognize that it is up against a predator intent on exploiting any sign of vulnerability. If Europe wishes to protect its values and influence, it must act as a force to be reckoned with, not a defenseless character in a familiar fable.***

The EU needs to take a stronger stance. Often seen as a “herbivore” in a world of ruthless predators, Europe must adapt if it is to have an impact in a region where Georgia lives next to one of the most aggressive neighbors: Putin’s Russia. To make a difference, Europe must be ready to show its teeth. Europe cannot afford to play the role of Little Red

Riding Hood, wandering naively through the forest while the wolf—Russia—waits to pounce. The EU must recognize that it is up against a predator intent on exploiting any sign of vulnerability. If Europe wishes to protect its values and influence, it must act as a force to be reckoned with, not a defenseless character in a familiar fable.

Europe strives to be more geopolitical, aiming to establish a strategy in its eastern neighborhood. After years of inertia, it has embraced enlargement as a tool to extend its influence. This recalls EU policy in the 1990s, but today's challenges resemble the post-WWII era, marked by Soviet expansion. The aim is not to draw a direct comparison to the 1930s but rather to find a time when a positive outcome was achieved despite adversity.

In the years after WWII, the Soviet Union expanded its control across Europe, toppling democratic governments in countries like Czechoslovakia and Poland, installing satellite regimes in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, and influencing neutral Austria and Finland. Communist forces gained power in Yugoslavia and Albania, waged a civil war in Greece, and approached near-majority support in France and Italy, with significant backing from Moscow.

How was Western Europe spared from Soviet dominance? Bold action and collaboration with the US were key, primarily through the Marshall Plan. The plan was not just economic but a broad countermeasure involving culture, education, media, and heavy security involvement. NATO was born then, with the CIA supporting anti-Soviet forces. Intellectuals, or “influencers” of the era, were mobilized to resist.

Today, the US may be less inclined to intervene so heavily in European affairs, especially after Trump's return to the White House. Europe will now need to shoulder more responsibility. Europe in 2024 is prosperous, stable, and more capable of self-organization than after the WW II, while Russia lacks the reach of the USSR and has more modest ambitions. Former Warsaw Pact nations are now NATO members, contributing to Western defense. Putin's focus is Ukraine, not Germany. Europe can act with political will, a fresh perspective, and a significant shift in industrial, security, strategic, and cultural policies. Recognizing Georgia's disputed elections as illegitimate could be a solid first step ■