GEOPOLITICS

№21 | AUGUST 2025

NATURAL BORN KILLERS

18+

Contains scenes of war, state-sponsored violence, destruction and heinous violations of international law. Viewer discretion is advised.

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GEOPOLITICS

Issue №21
August, 2025

Our Mission

Issue	**№21**
August	**2025**
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise,** we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual exchange, nurturing a communal space where each person can contribute meaningfully to the broader geopolitical discourse.

In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOpolitics* echoes the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia can and must advance the dissemination of universal democratic values and contribute to regional and international security. We support these goals through our analytical and intellectual contributions.

We have assembled a team of experts and contributors with deep knowledge and policy experience who enrich the conversation about Georgia's foreign and security policy, unveiling and scrutinizing Georgia's relations with the EU, NATO, the U.S., and other important geopolitical actors and international institutions. We also investigate the ramifications of internal developments for Georgia's geopolitical role and foreign relations. By doing so, we facilitate informed and substantial dialogue from, about and in Georgia.

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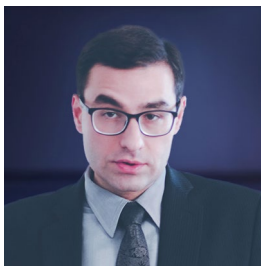

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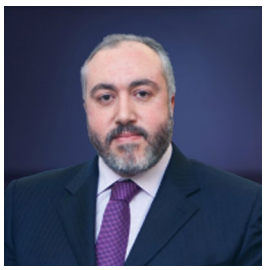

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Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili distinguishes himself as an accomplished leader in government, crisis management, and diplomacy. As the founder of TY Strategies LLC, he extends advisory services globally. A pivotal figure in co-founding the Revival Foundation, aiding Ukraine, and leading the New International Leadership Institute, Yakobashvili held key roles, including Georgia's Ambassador to the U.S. and Deputy Prime Minister. With the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, he is a Yale World Fellow, trained at Oxford and Harvard. As a co-founder and chair of the Governing Board of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, he actively contributes to global media discussions on regional security. His significant contributions have merited the Presidential Medal of Excellence.

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Georgia in 2008 Was Just the First Victim of the Natural Born Killers

Seventeen years have passed since the five-day war that marked the beginning of the Russian Federation's military campaign to dismantle the European security order, first in Georgia, then in Ukraine, and possibly other places in the not-so-distant future. On August 7, 2008, Russia launched its invasion of Georgia from the land, sea, air, and cyber – on an unheard-of scale at that time. The tanks that rolled into the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia marked the first time Russia deployed its military beyond its borders to punish a neighbor for choosing Europe over empire. It was the first act of a long war against the idea that small sovereign nations in Russia's neighborhood could choose Europe and detach themselves from "mother Russia."

The cover of this issue borrows from *Natural Born Killers* — a fitting metaphor for the Kremlin's behavior since 2008. The image portrays Russia as a serial aggressor that tried to assassinate Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 – all three times unsuccessfully. The killer returned to the scene — again and again — because the crime was never stopped the first time. The war against Georgia was a prelude to a longer hybrid military and political campaign against the European security order, being fought in military theaters, on the diplomatic stage, and in the information space. The refusal to confront this aggression decisively in 2008 made everything else possible. The refusal to confront it now head-on will make everything else inevitable.

This issue of *GEOpolitics* revisits the 2008 war — not as a distant memory, but as the starting point of the crisis we are still living through. It draws the line from Tskhinvali to Bucha, from occupied Abkhazia to the weaponization of Georgia's democracy today, and from Western hesitation then to the stakes we face now in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and beyond.

Sergi Kapanadze opens the issue with the retrospective analysis of the five lessons from the August 2008 war, laying bare Moscow's methods: war as a message, diplomacy as a delay, and international institutions as a means of leverage. He argues that the August war was the first military expression of a doctrine that rejects the sovereignty of neighboring states and seeks to restore Russia's sphere of influence through force, coercion, and disinformation. The article dissects the misread signals from the West — the failure to respond decisively in 2008, the preference for normalization over deterrence, and the false belief that Georgia's war was an anomaly rather than a harbinger of things to come. Beyond foreign policy failures, it also examines the domestic repercussions of the war, including how Russia's occupation has created frozen conflicts that continue to erode Georgia's sovereignty, how the trauma of 2008 has shaped public opinion, and how the Georgian Dream government failed to counter Russia's strategic objectives.

Jaba Devdariani and Tornike Zurabashvili pick up where Kapanadze leaves off, with a forensic examination of the system that has since metastasized within Georgia. They dissect the economic dimension of Russia's influence in Georgia, arguing that financial entanglement has become Moscow's most effective and least understood weapon in its hybrid war against the country. While the 2008 invasion represented a dramatic assertion of

hard power, the more enduring threat has seeped in through the veins of Georgia's economy — via remittances, trade dependencies, real estate acquisition, energy infrastructure, and oligarchic capture. The authors detail how Russia has built a system of control that operates below the radar of traditional security frameworks but is no less potent, especially under the Georgian Dream government, which has not only tolerated but deepened economic dependencies for political gain. They argue that financial flows — from shadowy business deals to diaspora-linked investments — are strategically used to buy silence, loyalty, and inaction, blunting democratic resistance from within.

Shota Gvineria takes the reader deeper into the machinery of state capture, mapping the psychological battlefield where reality is no longer debated but denied. Gvineria details how Georgia's ruling party has perfected the art of post-truth governance — where pro-European slogans mask authoritarian rule, and where the West is portrayed as both puppet-master and existential threat. Drawing chilling parallels to Goebbelsian information warfare, the article shows how disinformation in Georgia is no longer about persuasion but paralysis. Public belief is replaced by public fatigue. In such an environment, consent is manufactured not through conviction, but through confusion, leading to a society too exhausted to resist.

As Georgia sinks deeper into this hybrid swamp, the European Union is facing its own reckoning. Vano Chkhikvadze addresses this crisis head-on in his article, making a blunt call to action. The EU, he argues, must stop dithering between carrots and caveats. With visa liberalization under threat and Georgia's European future on life support, Brussels needs more than warnings — it needs consequences. Chkhikvadze offers a roadmap: targeted sanctions against enablers of authoritarianism, a rebooted communication strategy to speak directly to the Georgian people, and a long-overdue strategic clarity about what's at stake. Credibility is the EU's last currency in the region.

Natalie Sabanadze and Galip Dalay widen the lens by exploring the geostrategic aftershocks of Russia's wars. They argue that the South Caucasus can no longer be analyzed in isolation. The collapse of the post-Soviet order and the unraveling of American dominance in the Middle East have merged the two regions into a single, volatile security complex - multi-nodal and defined by shifting alliances. Türkiye, Iran, Azerbaijan, and now Armenia are recalibrating in real-time, often bypassing Russia entirely. Georgia, once a linchpin of the West in this contested space, now risks becoming irrelevant — or worse, complicit.

Thornike Gordadze closes the issue with an insightful comparison between Russia's past success in Georgia and its current failures in Armenia. He shows how Moscow is attempting to replicate the 2012 Georgian scenario in Yerevan — backing oligarchs, mobilizing the Church, exploiting post-war trauma — all in the hope of toppling Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. But this time, the script is being disrupted. The Armenian public, scarred by Russia's betrayals in 2020 and 2023, no longer believes in the myth of Moscow as protector. Western actors, once blind to hybrid warfare, are now alert. And Pashinyan, unlike Saakashvili, is striking first — legally, rhetorically, and diplomatically — against Kremlin proxies. Gordadze's conclusion is unambiguous: the lessons of Georgia have not been forgotten in Yerevan. If the West wants to stop Russia's next regime change operation, it must act not after the fall — but now, when the battle is still underway.

The war against Georgia never ended. It simply changed form and terrain. From bombs to banks, from bullets to broadcasts, from occupations to narratives — Russia has adapted, but never paused. This issue revisits August 2008 not out of nostalgia, but out of urgency. We are not remembering the first shot. We are warning that the killer is still at large ■

With Respect,

Editorial Team

Content

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GEOpolitics offers space for a wide range of perspectives, fostering independent thinking and open discussion. The journal articles reflect contributors' views and may not represent the editorial team's position.

Five Lessons from the Five-Day War

In August 2025, Georgia remembers the five-day war of August 2008. This tragic historical occurrence did not just reshape Georgia in the subsequent years but also laid the groundwork for Russia's further aggression against Ukraine and wider European security. The invasion of Russia, in hindsight, in conjunction with its military actions in Ukraine over the last decade, offers valuable lessons which must be internalized not only by Georgians, Ukrainians, and other nations, neighboring Russia, but by the European and Euro-Atlantic partners who have invested heavily in the European security order and a peaceful continent. In this article, I offer five main lessons that we can draw from the five-day war.

Lesson One: Russia Manufactures War and Blames Its Victims

A major lesson from Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008 is that Russia does not just stumble into wars. It scripts them with legal arguments, military theater, and preplanned provocations designed not only to justify aggression but to distort the very definition of it. Long before the first missile lands or the first soldier, a mercenary, or a "little green man" crosses a border, Moscow has already deployed its most critical weapon - the narrative.

> ***Russia does not just stumble into wars. It scripts them with legal arguments, military theater, and preplanned provocations designed not only to justify aggression but to distort the very definition of it.***

In Georgia in 2008, that narrative was dressed in humanitarian camouflage. Russia claimed it was "protecting its citizens" in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia — citizens it had manufactured over the years of illegal passport distribution. The Kremlin had spent years building the scaffolding for intervention from "peacekeepers" who failed to keep peace, to separatist provocations staged for effect, to Russian media stoking claims of Georgian "genocide" just days before the assault. By

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the time the Georgian side responded militarily in Tskhinvali, the pretext was ready.

The same template replayed in Ukraine, just on a grander stage. In Crimea, Moscow conjured a narrative of imminent ethnic repression after the Revolution of Dignity and then used it to smuggle troops past the global radar and declare a referendum at gunpoint. In Donbas, it invented a civil war it was secretly orchestrating and claimed to be a neutral party "supporting the will of the people." By 2022, the fiction had metastasized: Ukraine, the Kremlin claimed, was committing genocide, plotting nuclear weapons, and morphing into a NATO attack dog. The invasion that followed was framed as pre-emptive self-defense — complete with references to Article 51 of the UN Charter and a grotesque campaign to "de-nazify" a democratic nation led by a Jewish president.

Russia wraps its wars in the language of law and morality, not to convince everyone, but to convince enough—or confuse enough—to create hesitation, delay a response, or fracture consensus.

Ukraine, by now, is well aware of this. Since 2014, Kyiv has come to understand that narrative defense is a strategic defense. From the moment Crimea was seized, Ukraine went on the offensive — diplomatically, legally, and informationally. It denied the fake humanitarian rationale and exposed Russian troop movements. It framed the war as what it was: a naked violation of the UN Charter and a threat to European security. By the time Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine was answering propaganda in real time — with digital diplomacy, viral messaging, battlefield authenticity, and a unified international campaign. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke not only to the parliaments but to the public. Ukraine learned to preempt the *casus belli*, not merely react to it.

Georgia in 2008 was not so fortunate. Tbilisi responded, but not quickly enough, comprehensively enough, or with the kind of strategic communications machine that modern war demands. And it was a different time, too – social media was in the inception phase, and the iPhone came out just a year earlier. Western media, largely unprepared for the speed of the disinformation blitz, reached for the lazy fallback - "both sides." Even the Tagliavini Report, commissioned by the EU, while acknowledging Russia's disproportionate force and illegal occupation, still "blamed" Georgia for the escalation (not "starting of war," as the GD leaders currently irresponsibly claim). For Moscow, it was a rhetorical win. Nevertheless, Georgia in 2008 and subsequent years managed to turn the international opinion, through global media outreach, active diplomacy, constant efforts to keep the issue of occupation on the international agenda, and never giving up the main message – Russia is a threat not only to Georgia, but to Ukraine, the Baltic states, and wider European security.

> ***When the victim echoes the aggressor's talking points, the war is not just lost on the battlefield. It is lost in memory.***

And yet, the story of Georgia's narrative struggle did not end in 2008. It is being rewritten now, in 2025 — from within. Under the current ruling Georgian Dream regime, the very record of Russia's aggression is being softened, reframed, and reversed. The so-called *Tsulukiani Commission* has pushed a revisionist line that blames Georgia's leaders — namely, Mikheil Saakashvili, and by extension, Georgia — for starting the 2008 war. The aim is clear – to discredit the previous pro-Western administration and, its transatlantic partners. But it also serves a second, more insidious purpose: aligning Georgia's internal discourse with Russia's external narrative. When the victim echoes the aggressor's talking points, the war is not just lost on the battlefield. It is lost in memory.

If there is a single lesson from Georgia's 2008 war and Ukraine's current one, it is this: countering Russia's war begins with countering its narrative. Waiting for the facts to settle means losing the ground before the fight begins.

Lesson Two: Moscow Turns International Institutions into Instruments of Impunity

For all its tanks, warplanes, and operatives, one of Russia's most effective weapons remains a negotiation table. Not the kind where peace is made — but the kind where peace is stalled, where responsibility is obscured, and where aggression is recast as diplomacy. Over the past two decades, Moscow has mastered the art of using the very institutions meant to constrain it — the OSCE and the United Nations — to legitimize its advances and delay any meaningful response. In Georgia and Ukraine, the results have been grim.

The OSCE, born of the Helsinki spirit and clothed in the vocabulary of cooperation and transparency, was once the West's favorite instrument of soft deterrence. Today, as in 2008, it is Russia's perfect diplomatic smokescreen. When the 2008 war in Georgia loomed, the OSCE was already present in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia — technically. Its monitors, all five of them (!), were there, but their access was restricted beyond a 15-kilometer zone from the center of Tskhinvali. Moscow's objections froze their mandate. They could not verify Russian military buildups, nor could they respond to provocations staged by separatist forces. After the war, Russia refused to acknowledge Georgia's territorial integrity in OSCE documents and insisted on treating Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia as independent states. The result was that the OSCE folded its mission, retreated, and has never returned.

In Ukraine, Russia repeated the play — this time

with the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM), which operated in Donbas from 2014 to 2022. The mission, which was celebrated in 2014 as a second life for the OSCE, was constantly harassed, denied access to key areas, and blindfolded from observing cross-border arms flows. Then, just as Russia launched its full-scale invasion, it pulled the plug. Russia vetoed the extension of the SMM's mandate, effectively ejecting the OSCE from Ukraine — and with it, the last set of neutral eyes on the ground. In both conflicts, the pattern was the same: first deny observers the tools to act, then accuse them of being biased or ineffective, and finally eliminate them.

Yet, Russia does not want the OSCE abolished. On the contrary, it defends the organization — because it works exactly as Moscow needs it to. The OSCE's consensus-based model ensures that Russia, as a participating state, can veto any mandate, any language, any budget, any action. It allows Moscow to promote alternative narratives while appearing to engage in "constructive dialogue." And it ensures that every discussion — about war, occupation, or aggression — can be reframed as a dispute, an internal matter, or an unfortunate misunderstanding wrapped in the language of "constructive ambiguity."

The UN offers a similar story, only on a grander stage. The institution created to prevent wars of aggression has been paralyzed precisely because it gives the aggressor a seat at the table — and a veto in its most powerful chamber. In 2008, as Russian forces advanced into Georgia, the UN Security Council could not even issue a statement. Russia blocked every draft, every call for withdrawal, every mention of its own culpability. In 2009, it went further, vetoing the renewal of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) unless Abkhazia was recognized as an independent country. The UN mission vanished. Georgia's attempts to instigate the peacekeeping mission under the General Assembly's aegis – the so-called United for Peace framework – were not supported by the Western allies, afraid to impose a peacekeeping mission in a hostile environment, opposed by Russia.

> ***Russia continues to invest in these institutions. Not because it believes in multilateralism but because the appearance of multilateralism provides cover for unilateral action.***

In Ukraine, the theater has been more grotesque. Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, and the UN Security Council could do nothing. Russia launched a war in Donbas — the Council did nothing. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine outright, and while the General Assembly passed symbolic resolutions, the Security Council once again collapsed under Moscow's expected veto. Russia even chaired the Security Council while occupying territory in two member states. The arsonist was not just holding the fire hose. He was also moderating the debate on fire safety. This is why Russia continues to invest in these institutions. Not because it believes in multilateralism but because the appearance of multilateralism provides cover for unilateral action.

Ukraine has learned this lesson. It still speaks at the UN — but no longer expects it to act. Instead, Kyiv has shifted its energy to institutions that cannot be vetoed: the UN General Assembly, where Russia is outvoted; international courts, where violations can at least be documented and named, and Western alliances, where real decisions are made. Ukraine treats the Security Council not as a venue for resolution but as a platform to expose obstruction.

Georgia once tried this, too. However, under the Georgian Dream, that impulse has waned. Tbilisi no longer demands the return of the UN and OSCE missions. It rarely raises the issue of Russia's OSCE sabotage. Instead, it entertains the fiction that di-

alogue with Moscow — or neutrality in the face of occupation — will somehow yield better results.

Lesson Three: Only Force, Not Hesitation, Stops Russia

If there is one thing Russia understands better than the West, it is the value of time, that critical window between the first violation and the first consequence. Moscow has learned to exploit that gap with ruthless precision. And what makes it possible is not strength or strategy alone but something far more predictable - the West's reluctance to engage.

> ***Russia does not fear diplomacy. It only fears force.***

Caution is embedded in the political DNA of Western democracies — the instinct to avoid escalation, to exhaust all diplomatic avenues, to seek consensus. But Russia does not fear diplomacy. It only fears force. And for years, the West's attempts to de-escalate crises with Moscow have, ironically, created the very conditions in which aggression flourished.

In Georgia, this hesitancy played out in real time. By the summer of 2008, all the warning signs were flashing — a militarized "peacekeeping" force, rampant passportization, provocations across the boundary lines, and a creeping Russian build-up masked as humanitarian engagement. Russia even flew the fighter jets over Georgia when the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was visiting the country. And yet, the conflict was framed mainly by Western capitals as a frozen dispute, one best managed through cautious observation and dialogue with the predator. When war finally erupted, the EU scrambled to negotiate a ceasefire, not to reverse the aggression but to freeze it. No deterrence preceded the invasion. No punishment followed it. Russia paid no price for invading Georgia — and reaped every reward.

The lesson was internalized in Moscow: as long as the West fears provocation, it will not prevent it. That insight became part of Russia's military doctrine.

When Russia moved on Ukraine in 2014, the pattern held. Crimea was seized with astonishing speed. Donbas was set ablaze under the fiction of local insurgency. The response in the form of sanctions was modest and delayed. Military assistance to Kyiv trickled in, hedged by legal restrictions and fears of "sending the wrong signal." The Minsk Protocol and Minsk II Agreement — billed as peace initiatives — in practice institutionalized Russian leverage over Ukraine's political system. Moscow was treated as a mediator, not an arsonist. From 2015 to 2021, Western support for Ukraine was characterized as reactive, incremental, and cautious. And Russia kept watching — concluding, accurately, that there was no appetite in the West for confrontation, in turn growing its appetite for full-scale aggression.

> ***The ceasefire negotiated by Nicolas Sarkozy did not stop the advance — it merely formalized the status quo after Russia had already achieved its objectives. But what actually made Moscow stop was not a signature — it was a signal from the USA.***

In Georgia, this failure of deterrence nearly proved fatal. As Russian tanks approached Tbilisi in August 2008, the Georgian military was overwhelmed, the international community paralyzed, and the country braced for collapse. The ceasefire negotiated by Nicolas Sarkozy did not stop the advance — it merely formalized the status quo after Russia had already achieved its objectives. But what actually

made Moscow stop was not a signature — it was a signal from the USA.

When U.S. cargo planes landed at Tbilisi International Airport, delivering humanitarian aid in full view of Russian intelligence, the message was unmistakable. When President George W. Bush, with the Defense Secretary by his side, announced that U.S. Navy vessels were heading to the Black Sea, even under the guise of non-military support, the effect was immediate. Russia stopped short of Tbilisi. Its forces, which had already reached western Georgia, pulled back. The advance was halted not only by diplomacy but also by deterrence, fear of the unknown, and the risk of escalation with the United States.

This is the only pattern that matters. Russia backs down only when it risks losing — militarily, politically, reputationally. Not when it is reasoned with, but when it is forced to reassess the cost of proceeding. In Ukraine, that pattern repeated itself. Russian forces retreated from Kyiv once the city stood strong and political leadership did not flee (much like in Georgia in 2008). They abandoned Kharkiv when Ukrainian counterattacks broke their supply lines. They left Kherson when logistics collapsed. They stopped advancing when they met with Western defensive and offensive weapons.

> ***Moscow never saw moderation as wisdom. It sees it as space.***

For too long, Western policy has been guided by the illusion that moderation can buy stability. That showing caution, withholding weapons, or softening statements can somehow "manage" Russia. But Moscow never saw moderation as wisdom. It sees it as space. Every pause, every diplomatic nicety, is an invitation to move further. And every inch unchallenged becomes a mile entrenched.

Lesson Four: Ceasefires Are Paper Shields

There is a persistent delusion that haunts Western diplomacy: the belief that a signature on paper can restrain a regime that rules by force and that treaties bind the Kremlin. But in Russia's strategic playbook, agreements are not obligations — they are tactics and intermissions, strategically timed and cynically abused.

We have seen this script before. In Georgia, in 2008, the six-point ceasefire agreement — brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and touted as a triumph of diplomacy — was dead on arrival. It called for Russian forces to withdraw to pre-conflict positions, for humanitarian access, and for an international dialogue and the return of the displaced persons. Even before the ink dried, Russian troops were digging in rather than pulling out. New bases appeared in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Ethnic cleansing continued beneath the euphemism of "stabilization." And in a final act of defiance, Moscow recognized both territories as "independent states," gutting the agreement.

Ukraine followed the same logic. In 2014 and again in 2015, the Minsk Agreements — negotiated under the auspices of the OSCE with Russia seated at the table not as an aggressor but as a so-called "mediator" — were welcomed as a diplomatic breakthrough. In reality, they were structurally rigged. Russia refused to be acknowledged as a party to the conflict. The terms demanded political concessions from Ukraine before the restoration of territorial control. Ceasefire violations occurred daily — almost exclusively by Russia and its proxies — and went unpunished.

Then came 2022. And with it, the illusion shattered. Moscow tore through the remnants of Minsk as casually as it had signed them. Another full-scale invasion. Another offer to "negotiate" in Istanbul in

2022. Another attempt to use talks not as a solution but as a tactic — to stall Ukrainian advances, split the West, and test who still clung to the myth that Russia can be reasoned with.

Treaties, to the Kremlin, are only useful so long as they serve a tactical advantage. Once that utility expires, they are violated, reinterpreted, or tossed aside — with zero regard for precedent or legality. The Budapest Memorandum of 1994, which guaranteed Ukraine's sovereignty in exchange for surrendering its nuclear arsenal, was torn to shreds when Crimea was seized, just like the Medvedev-Sarkozy-Saakashvili agreement was never implemented.

> ***Treaties, to the Kremlin, are only useful so long as they serve a tactical advantage. Once that utility expires, they are violated, reinterpreted, or tossed aside — with zero regard for precedent or legality.***

In Georgia, the historical memory of this betrayal is now being erased from within. The Georgian Dream, far from demanding implementation of the 2008 ceasefire, now downplays its violations. Its narrative subtly shifts the blame back to Georgia itself — as if the war was provoked, as if the West was a puppet master who pushed Saakashvili into war. In doing so, they not only echo Moscow's talking points but strip Georgia of its legal and moral defense. This is not just a revisionism of the past but a strategic self-disarmament.

Lesson Five: Georgia was the First Battlefield in Russia's War on Europe's Security Order

Every war Moscow wages is a confrontation with the idea of Europe - whole and free. From Stalin's redrawing of postwar borders to Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the objective has remained remarkably consistent: to assert control over Europe's security architecture by demanding a veto over the choices of others.

In the early Cold War, Stalin's vision was enforced with tanks and ultimatums. A cordon of satellite states buffered Moscow from the West, their sovereignty neutralized by ideological allegiance and military coercion. The Warsaw Pact was not a defensive alliance but a mechanism of control. When Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 moved toward autonomy, Soviet troops crushed the deviation. The Brezhnev Doctrine codified the rules: no state behind the Iron Curtain was allowed to chart its own path.

Even when détente introduced new diplomatic languages, the fundamentals did not shift. Brezhnev's participation in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act was strategic, not ideological. The Soviets aimed to lock in recognition of postwar borders and legitimize their hold over Eastern Europe. The West, meanwhile, focused on the Act's human rights provisions, using them to probe Soviet vulnerabilities. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) did not reconcile the two visions — it suspended the conflict under the illusion of balance.

Mikhail Gorbachev's "Common European Home" rhetoric embraced cooperation and soft security, even allowing for the unification of Germany and the inclusion of human rights in security dialogue. But the underlying logic still centered on Russia. NATO, in this vision, would gradually become obsolete. Security would be managed through new collective structures that embedded Moscow at the core. The Soviet Union might share the house — but it would still write the rules.

The 1990 Charter of Paris, signed just before the USSR collapsed, marked a high point of hope. It gave birth to the OSCE and laid out principles of voluntary alliances, inviolable borders, and peace-

ful change. But that moment was brief. Under Boris Yeltsin, as NATO expanded and the EU deepened, the Kremlin recoiled. Russia's integrationist overtures — led by Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev — were not rewarded with the veto Moscow expected. And when it became clear that the post-Cold War order would not grant Russia co-equal authority (just a NATO-Russia Council), the strategy pivoted. Partnership gave way to resentment, which drove Putin's ambitions to revamp the European security order at the earliest convenience.

By 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia, the old doctrine had returned — modernized, but familiar. Medvedev's proposed European Security Treaty (EST) cloaked Russia's ambition in the language of multilateralism and indivisible security. In substance, it was a Brezhnev Doctrine 2.0: a demand for NATO to seek Moscow's permission on every decision and to freeze expansion at Russia's convenience. Most European states saw it for what it was — a well-known old bid for institutional veto. That is why the EST was declined by the European powers and the discussions were thrown down the OSCE's no-consensus drain in the form of the Corfu Process.

> ***The West's weak and fragmented response to the August 2008 war confirmed what Moscow needed to know. The rules-based order could be bent. Encouraged by passivity, the Kremlin advanced. Crimea fell in 2014.***

The West's weak and fragmented response to the August 2008 war confirmed what Moscow needed to know. The rules-based order could be bent. Encouraged by passivity, the Kremlin advanced. Crimea fell in 2014. Donbas became a slow-burning war zone. And by 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, preceded by a list of demands that amounted to rewriting Europe's post–Cold War history: no NATO in Ukraine or Georgia, a rollback of forces in Eastern Europe, and an end to Western influence in Russia's "near abroad." These were not negotiation terms. They were ultimatums.

The Kremlin has never hidden its true objective. It seeks to replace Europe's pluralistic security community — based on voluntary alliances, legal predictability, and peaceful change — with a geopolitical order of hierarchy and veto. In this order, countries like Georgia and Ukraine may have flags and governments, but not agency. Sovereignty is conditional, and independence must be cleared with Moscow. This is why has pushed in various international forums Western acquiescence to the principle that "no state should expand its security at the expense of the other" – an euphemism for a veto on European security matters.

Russia's wars, therefore, are not episodic, but systemic. The Kremlin seeks to fracture the postwar European project — not through brute force alone but by dismantling the foundations of mutual trust, voluntary integration, and shared norms. What it demands is a new security architecture with a restoration of imperial privilege.

> ***The fight of the Georgian people and the fight of the Ukrainian army for their nations' independence, sovereignty, and European future are the same fights. The longer the West treats Georgia and Ukraine as separate crises, the deeper the cracks will grow.***

Therefore, the fight of the Georgian people and the fight of the Ukrainian army for their nations' independence, sovereignty, and European future are the same fights. The longer the West treats Georgia and Ukraine as separate crises, the deeper the cracks will grow. These are not isolated aggressions. They are chapters in the same campaign — a hundred-year struggle against the idea of a Europe unbound by Russian veto ■

The Power of the Purse: How Money Saved Ivanishvili's Regime

The recent rifts within the Georgian Dream may not seem to threaten the regime's edifice, but they serve as indicators of fault lines of the system that billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili has erected to protect and advance his interests.

On 28 November 2024, Georgian Dream Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced that Tbilisi was unilaterally suspending talks on joining the European Union, drawing a mix of confusion and outrage across the political spectrum. The statement seemed not only ill-timed but also miscalculated. After all, he was speaking to a public where pro-European sentiment is deeply embedded in the national psyche; a memory of several popular uprisings, all driven by aspirations for democratic reforms and alignment with the West.

Yet, the Georgian Dream managed to survive the twin crises of domestic backlash and international condemnation.

So, what explains the system's resilience? Has the public become less enthusiastic about the concept of democracy and European integration? Or have the authorities become more adept at suppressing dissent? There may be some truth to both, but neither fully accounts for what we are witnessing in Tbilisi.

For most of its post-independence history, politics in Georgia has been as much about the economy as about democracy, human rights, and foreign policy orientation. But much like in previous times, the economy does not receive the attention it deserves in the mainstream political analysis of recent developments.

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Contributor

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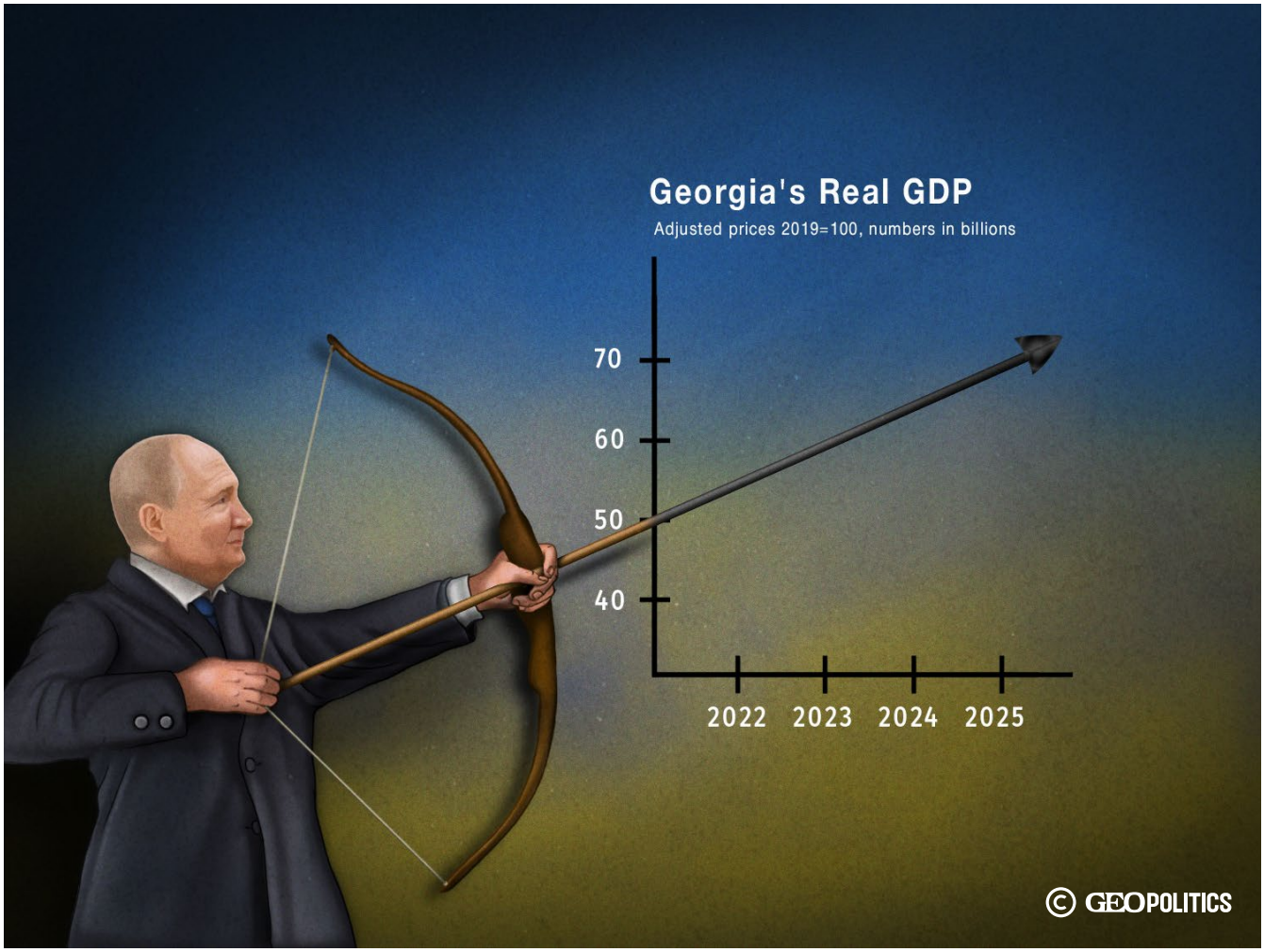

To understand why the Georgian Dream survived, we need to follow the money.

So, to understand why the Georgian Dream survived, we need to follow the money. And to follow the money, we must untangle a complex and increasingly opaque web of relations between political leaders, informal figures, and business elites – a system shaped and sustained under the shadow of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the oligarch whose influence continues to define Georgia's political landscape of the last 13 years.

State-Business Relations in Georgia

In the early 1990s, Georgia's economy was more a casualty of politics than its driver. Internal conflicts and the collapse of state institutions left the country's economy in shambles. The GDP collapsed by nearly two-thirds from 1991 to 1993, one of the most dramatic contractions in contemporary history. A recovery around 1995 relied on classical fiscal tightening and privatization, backed by international financial institutions. Georgia also became a node in hydrocarbon pipeline projects aimed at linking Türkiye and Europe with the Caspian region. But entrenched corruption, coupled with organized crime and weak governance, undercut growth and social recovery. Severe budget deficits, unpaid wages, and soaring unemployment remained unaddressed.

Ultimately, public discontent with Eduard Shevardnadze's political and economic policies led to the Rose Revolution of 2003, ushering in a team of young reformists under the leadership of President Mikheil Saakashvili. Inspired by free market ideology, Saakashvili's government launched an aggres-

sive campaign against corruption, simultaneously reducing administrative burdens and minimizing the state's role in the economy. The nimbler, less corrupt government and investor-friendly rules spurred GDP growth and budgetary revenues, although the benefits were slow to trickle down to the broader public. Still, Georgia demonstrated remarkable agility in recovering from both the Russian embargo of 2006 and the Russian invasion of 2008.

But with more money came the temptation to leverage it for political purposes. Numerous accounts from the early years of Saakashvili's administration indicate that funds were extracted from businesses. At the same time, later, companies were reportedly pressured to finance specific infrastructure or social projects. Others were directly co-opted by the authorities, offering preferential access to economic opportunities in exchange for political loyalty and generous pre-election endowments.

The year 2012 witnessed the first-ever orderly democratic transition and held promise, including in the economy. Although the central tenets of Georgia's economic policy, such as trade liberalization and bureaucratic simplification, remained in place, the Georgian Dream adopted more socially oriented policies. Several large-scale social spending programs were enacted, particularly in healthcare and education, financed in part by cuts in the defense budget, increased Western financial support, and a revival of trade with Russia, which had dropped to near zero following the 2006 embargo and the 2008 invasion. This shift (but also perhaps earlier improvements in the quality of healthcare) yielded some results – mortality rates declined, and the quality of life improved for some segments of the population. Still, the GDP grew at a moderate pace and rising expenditures, combined with external shocks in the mid-2010s, led to a significant depreciation of the national currency.

By the time COVID-19 hit, these pressures were largely offset by revenues from tourism, exports, and services, particularly in the transport and logistics sectors. In parallel, Georgia continued to reap the benefits of free trade agreements, concluded first with the EU and later with China. The opening of visa-free travel to the Schengen Area had a positive effect as well, boosting remittance inflows from Georgians working in the European Union. No less important was the sustained financial support from the West. In short, although there were no significant economic leaps forward in the first decade of the Georgian Dream administration, there was also no significant worsening.

In politics, this meant there were no strong forces for change. The large-scale social spending created the impression that the authorities were responsive to public needs. A gentleman's agreement gradually took hold – one in which the state was expected to address basic social needs while largely stepping back from interfering in private enterprise, at least in most cases. This arrangement suited business circles well. For many in the business community, the new rules of the game seemed less intrusive; the state no longer coerced businesses into funding favored projects and the overall trajectory seemed more predictable, they argued.

Underneath It All

Behind the formal façade, however, some of the uglier elements of the political economy of power were retained and even expanded. The foundational elements of big business-state relations leaned further into political and crony favoritism, exemplified by lucrative public procurement contracts to well-connected firms, often with close links to Ivanishvili's inner circle. The revolving door between politics and business also widened, especially for former officials from law enforcement. Similarly, the practice of political donations

in exchange for protection or economic advantages persisted and grew even stronger.

> ***The foundational elements of big business-state relations leaned further into political and crony favoritism, exemplified by lucrative public procurement contracts to well-connected firms, often with close links to Ivanishvili's inner circle.***

But while the underlying transactional dynamics remained intact, one key difference emerged: Georgia now had a leader who was not merely a politician balancing among competing business circles, but a business actor himself. And like leaders of his stamp, Ivanishvili had a direct stake in the economy—a significant departure from all three of Georgia's post-independence leaders and also a marked contrast from the so-called "illiberal" European leaders, such as Viktor Orbán or Aleksandar Vučić.

Importantly, Ivanishvili was also backed by his vast personal wealth, which insulated him from domestic political pressures to an extent unimaginable for all previous Georgian leaders. This meant that Ivanishvili could buy his way through the usual constraints of electoral politics. He made this very clear on several occasions – first in the 2018 elections, when the ruling party's favorite, Salome Zourabichvili, came close to losing a race against the opponent, and then in 2020, when the opposition fielded an effective campaign against the Georgian Dream. To reverse the tide, Ivanishvili intervened directly, pouring millions into the campaigns to secure victory for his party.

On most other occasions, however, it was not Ivanishvili but his lieutenants who were expected to chip in, including in financing the Georgian Dream's propaganda machinery, satellite political parties, and a network of loyal commentators. In other words, the oligarch was very prudent in staking his own money into political control, preferring the role of the lender of last resort, rather than the primary financier.

> ***For Ivanishvili, controlling Georgia was much more than a profit-making opportunity or an occasional diversion. What Georgia offered was much bigger - it lent a convenient sovereign shield for his assets.***

But for Ivanishvili, controlling Georgia was much more than a profit-making opportunity or an occasional diversion. What Georgia offered was much bigger - it lent a convenient sovereign shield for his assets. So, when a rogue Credit Suisse trader swindled Ivanishvili in an illicit investment scheme, and he came to see it as a malevolent conspiracy masterminded by the West to oust him from power, Ivanishvili began a dangerous game of brinkmanship with the West, signaling that he was willing to leverage the country's foreign policy orientation unless his money was fully and unconditionally recovered.

By 2020, the Georgian Dream had gained relative stability as a monolithic party of power, overcoming internal differences and capturing nearly all state institutions. The Georgian Dream also managed to retain a façade of international respectability.

But Russia's invasion in Ukraine has upset this status quo in several important ways.

Stress Test of Ukraine

When Georgian authorities refrained from adopting economic sanctions against Russia – and instead deepened their ties with Moscow – many were taken aback. How could a society that had experienced similar aggression appear so indifferent to its Ukrainian peers, they asked. How could

a staunch Western ally remain silent in the face of Russian brutality, others echoed the sentiment. But the reality was that this was no longer about historical memory, shared trauma, or foreign policy orientation.

Georgia met the Russian invasion of Ukraine not with solidarity but with the logic of a deeply clientelist, rent-oriented system – one in which state institutions were routinely leveraged to serve the interests of a single individual and his inner circle; with a system where political loyalty was sustained not through genuine redistribution but through large-scale social spending and co-optation of business elites. Importantly, this was a country whose leadership understood (and shared) the mentality and business interests of the Russian elite.

> ***The overwhelming support of the majority of Georgians to the Ukrainian cause, or the fresh memories of the Russian invasion, mattered little compared to financial gains. What mattered was money and regime survival.***

This was also a system in which the basic principles of democratic accountability had long been broken down. As a result, the overwhelming support of the majority of Georgians to the Ukrainian cause, or the fresh memories of the Russian invasion, mattered little compared to financial gains. What mattered was money and regime survival.

Seen through this lens, the Georgian Dream's reaction was hardly surprising – on the contrary, it was entirely logical. They saw the war as an opportunity to profit and seized it without hesitation or regard to morality.

And they opened the gates to the Russians.

Cut off from the rest of Europe, tens of thousands of Russians flocked to Georgia. In 2022 alone, 62,304 Russians entered and remained in the country; in 2023, the corresponding number was 52,627. Georgia proved particularly appealing – and welcoming – for Russians. Its liberal residency requirements allowed them to stay for a year or longer, while its banks made it possible to access the global financial market.

The benefits seemed mutual. Fearing collapse in their banking system, Russians relocated their assets to Georgia – bringing more than two billion USD only in 2022, a fourfold increase as compared to the previous year. They rented or purchased houses and apartments, boosting the real estate sector. They also started businesses. In that year alone, Russians established 11,000 new enterprises, mostly in the IT sector.

In parallel, trade and cargo transit increased. The air traffic resumed in May 2023, despite opposition from Europe, followed by Moscow lifting visa requirements for Georgian nationals. All of this played a significant role in the increased economic output in Georgia. As a result, in 2022, the economy grew by 10.4%. In 2023, the number stood at 7.8%, and in 2024, the country registered a 9.4% GDP growth.

> ***While no official accounts provide evidence of outright sanctions evasion, numerous reports indicate that post-invasion trade has operated in a legal gray zone.***

But there is much more to the story than transactional post-Soviet government and business elites piggybacking on new economic opportunities. While no official accounts provide evidence of outright sanctions evasion, numerous reports indicate that post-invasion trade has operated in a legal gray zone.

Over the past three years, Georgia's trade volumes have increased across several commodities, including cars, electronics, and other consumer goods. While trade turnover with Russia has remained relatively stable since the invasion, exports to third countries have surged. One report indicates that exports to Armenia increased by 128% from 2022 to 2023, while those to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan rose by 201% and 148%, respectively. This suggests that the country has been enabling the flow of goods into Russia.

The re-export of automobiles to Russia is a case in point here.

Since the outbreak of the full-scale war, Georgia has become a key transit corridor for vehicle trade. Brought by sea into Georgia from Europe and the United States, cars are exported either directly to Russia or via Armenia, Kazakhstan, or Kyrgyzstan, where they are first cleared for customs within the Eurasian Economic Union and then sent to their final destination in Russia. According to Geostat, Georgia's national statistics office, car exports from Georgia increased from USD 0.5 billion in 2021 to USD 2.4 billion in 2024.

Recent investigative work by Georgian journalists has also suggested that the country is used as an intermediary for exporting dual-use items to Russia, both directly and through third countries. These include electronic devices, such as radio navigation equipment, routers, processors, and recorders – all of which are fit for military purposes and are banned by Western sanctions.

The import of oil and petroleum products from Russia has also increased, from USD 0.8 billion in 2021 to USD 1.3 billion in 2024, leading some observers to suggest that Georgia may be circumventing the sanctions regime by reselling oil (a commodity the country produces in only modest amounts) to Europe.

Money, Elections, and Pivot from the West

Despite consistent economic growth, the increase did not translate into improved well-being for large segments of the population. On the contrary, with a large migratory influx, property prices soared and most Georgians continued to grapple with rising inflation. Indeed, a recent survey found that 81% of Georgians believe their economic conditions have either remained the same or worsened over the past three years.

> ***During the 2024 election campaign, the party captains reportedly threatened voters that they would lose these benefits if they voted for the Georgian Dream.***

Still, additional windfall profits allowed the authorities the freedom of lavish social spending. For instance, from 2021 to 2024, the number of subsistence allowance beneficiaries increased from 587,524 to 671,337, to nearly two-fifths of the electorate. As the already weak differentiation between the state and the ruling party effectively vanished, this spending was leveraged for electoral gain, giving the ruling party an unfair advantage. In the lead-up to the October 2024 elections, the Georgian Dream also introduced a range of additional state-funded programs, including debt forgiveness schemes, public employment initiatives, and salary increases for civil servants. During the 2024 election campaign, the party captains reportedly threatened voters that they would lose these benefits if they voted for the Georgian Dream.

The new geopolitical landscape gave the ruling party additional confidence. A key factor was the closure of the Northern Corridor – China's traditional overland trade route to Europe. Georgia, as an element of the Middle Corridor, an alternative

trade route project connecting China to Europe, found itself not only economically stronger but also more strategically important. Tbilisi's standing was further enhanced by discussions on an underwater electricity cable linking Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary. The EU's interest in these two projects – and by extension, Georgia's role within them – gave Tbilisi an impression of becoming indispensable. "Europe needs Georgia as much as Georgia needs Europe," the Georgian Dream's leaders argued with self-assurance.

Increased revenues from alternative sources, beyond traditional Europe-bound trade, allowed Ivanishvili to hedge his positions against potential economic repercussions of worsened relations with Europe. At the same time, the new geopolitical constellation fostered a sense of geopolitical impunity. At the same time, the ideology of mortal confrontation with the West and fears of lurking conspiracy have permeated his mindset, likely reinforced through communication with Moscow circles who pride themselves on knowing "what is *really* happening."

Tightening the Regime

This new constellation played out particularly negatively for Georgian democracy. War profits emboldened the ruling party, prompting more aggressive actions against dissenting voices and strengthening the tendency to downplay – if not outright dismiss – external concerns over democratic deterioration. As a result, the Georgian Dream's authoritarian drift accelerated.

Demonstrating Ivanishvili's pattern of thinking as primarily an economic actor, the party went after money - specifically, the sources financing resistance to the regime. Laws targeting foreign support to civil society and media were rubber-stamped by the Parliament one after another.

Beyond ideological virtue signaling to Moscow, the stack of legislation served to undercut the only financial flows over which Ivanishvili had control. This proved particularly painful for civil society. Compounded by the withdrawal of USAID and a general drop in aid budgets in European states as they rearm and support Ukraine, organized civil society groups have found themselves operating in a survival mode.

Simultaneously, the Georgian Dream moved to choke the protest financially, issuing fines for alleged violations of protest legislation at an unprecedented scale and frequency. The middle class, which has been driving the protests, found its economic base stretched to the limit while business elites sympathetic to the movement exercised caution, opting to make decisions based on market instincts rather than values and principles.

> ***Pro-democracy protesters have found themselves fighting an uphill battle – fighting for their survival while challenging a government that is not only repressive but increasingly propped up by revenues from murky trade flows between Russia and the West.***

As a result, pro-democracy protesters have found themselves fighting an uphill battle – fighting for their survival while challenging a government that is not only repressive but increasingly propped up by revenues from murky trade flows between Russia and the West.

The Going Gets Tough

Even though things seem to be going well for the Georgian Dream in many ways, worrying signs also abound. Its authoritarian slide was met with more resistance at home than their leaders expected. Excessive violence and financial terror against citizens did not cancel the protest. On the contrary, it widened rifts among the Georgian Dream's high-

ups, prompted mid-level defections, and eroded overall support. A reset with the U.S., fueled by the election of Donald Trump (undoubtedly murmured by Muscovite elites into the Georgian Dream leader's ears), did not occur either.

> ***Excessive violence and financial terror against citizens did not cancel the protest. On the contrary, it widened rifts among the Georgian Dream's high-ups, prompted mid-level defections, and eroded overall support.***

Threatened by sanctions, Ivanishvili rushed to repatriate his assets, a move that is significant on two levels. Not only did it expose his vulnerability to external political shocks, it also highlighted how closely his wealth is interlinked with Georgian politics. More worryingly, it also signaled how reliant Ivanishvili has become on maintaining political control in Tbilisi – ruling Georgia was once just a profitable convenience when the billionaire had the luxury of leaving wherever and whenever he pleased. Now, a threat to his power in Georgia could prove much costlier.

Profits from Russian immigration have also dwindled as Moscow found larger economic partners and put its economy on a war footing. This, combined with domestic instability and confrontation with the West, seems to have strained Georgian Dream coffers enough for Ivanishvili to call in some of his earlier investments. And as Vladimir Putin found at the outset of the war, his Georgian counterpart came to realize that some of his henchmen had pilfered and could not repay. The large wave of purges currently taking place under Irakli Kobakhidze's watch, including the mysterious shooting incident involving the former head of the Adjara government, Tornike Rizhvadze, and the seemingly routine discovery of a firearm in the travel suitcase of a prominent Georgian businessman, appears to fit this pattern all too well.

Looking Ahead

Seeing through this light, Georgia's immediate future is played out in bank accounts as much as it is in the streets of Tbilisi and elsewhere. The Georgian Dream might have carried the torch unchallenged until this day, but its model of politico-economic governance – rooted in clientelism and underpinned by general fiscal laxity – is also hitting its limits. Georgia may continue to benefit – by inertia – from being a comfortable zone through which the opponents trade, legally or less so, but a sanctioned hardline regime in a domestic crisis of legitimacy cannot perform this function for long.

Moving forward, Ivanishvili could make a step towards compromise with the West and the domestic opposition or inject his own money in order to stabilize the authoritarian system. But for that, he would need much more visible, personal, and direct control.

Are current purges a sign of dawning personalized autocracy? This may well be, but without underpinning natural resources or personal political charisma to proffer it, such a regime is likely to be very brittle ■

The Georgian Dream's Goebbelsian Propaganda

Joseph Goebbels, the notorious Nazi Minister of Propaganda, crafted a blueprint for controlling perceptions, public opinion, and behavior that has been studied for decades. His cognitive manipulation principles focused on centralized media control, emotional simplification, calculated repetition, enemy vilification, and total message dominance. While Goebbels operated in an era before digital hyperconnectivity, his foundational tactics remain alarmingly relevant today, adapted, expanded, and amplified for the internet-driven communication space. Goebbels's core propaganda principles have long served as the foundational guide for authoritarian regimes around the world, regardless of whether or not those regimes are explicitly genocidal and fascist or not.

This article examines how the Georgian Dream regime employs propaganda tactics that closely follow the principles of Goebbels. In the best tradition of one of the most infamous propaganda principles often attributed to Goebbels — *accuse your enemy of what you are guilty of yourself* — the regime's Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze recently accused critics of the regime's anti-Western and repressive policies of using the tactics Georgian Dream has long relied on itself: "We are dealing with Goebbels-style propaganda methods where you first create an enemy image and then attribute connections to it to your opponent. Such propaganda does not require any facts. The main thing is that the propaganda is total and the message is repeated by as many agents as possible." By applying this very strategy, the Georgian Dream has systematically reshaped Georgia's political environment, undermined democratic institutions, and attempted to shift the country's geopolitical orientation.

Russian propaganda from the Soviet era through the modern hybrid warfare era closely follows the same playbook. Under Moscow's close patronage, the Georgian Dream's propaganda increasingly

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RADICALIZATION
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relies on these Goebbelsian methods, especially in response to massive public protests against the regime's openly anti-Western shift and rapid authoritarian escalation. The regime has intensified its anti-Western rhetoric, denied its repressive actions, and placed blame for unrest on fabricated enemies. This classic authoritarian strategy of denying facts and inverting reality aims to saturate the public sphere with conspiracies, thereby deflecting accountability. Understanding how the Georgian Dream applies these propaganda principles offers valuable insight into the broader phenomenon of modern authoritarian information control, revealing how regimes worldwide exploit digital platforms to sustain power and manipulate public opinion.

A Durable and Adaptable Pattern: Ten Core Principles

The framework of propaganda principles attributed to Joseph Goebbels is derived from a combination of his writings, particularly his diaries, and extensive scholarly interpretation. One of the most influential analyses is Leonard W. Doob's 1950 article, which presents a thematic outline of Goebbels's methods rather than a fixed or numbered list. Over time, scholars and commentators have adapted this analysis into simplified versions to make the ideas more accessible for public discussion and teaching. Although there is no universally agreed upon set of principles, these interpretations effectively capture how authoritarian regimes manipulate information to control perception and consolidate power.

This article highlights a widely cited list of Goebbels's ten principles, categorizing them into two groups: structural elements that concern the organization and enforcement of propaganda, and narrative elements that pertain to the actual content. While structural methods have evolved in response to digital hyperconnectivity, the narrative strategies remain strikingly consistent. The following sections examine each principle alongside concrete examples from the Georgian Dream's propaganda, showing how these enduring tactics persist in a new information and technology environment.

Principle	Short Description
Centralized Authority	Propaganda must be controlled by a single organization to ensure consistency and total message dominance.
One-sided Messaging	Only present information that fits the official narrative; float theories of conspiracies to drown out the facts.
Media Control	Exercise aggressive media manipulation to dominate all communication channels and suppress alternatives.
Use of Technology	Leverage modern media and technology to maximize reach, attention, and message saturation.
Simplicity	Use rallies, slogans, symbols, and emotionally charged simple messages to quickly move audiences.
Vilification of Enemies	Create enemies and blame them for all problems, brand dissenters as anti-national to unite society against them.
Continuous Criticism	Constantly and relentlessly attack and discredit political opponents and dissenting voices.
Repetition	Repeat lies until accepted as truth; constant repetition embeds ideas until they are accepted by the public.
Adaptation to Events	Quickly justify every act in the name of the nation and adjust messaging to current developments.
Truth as a Tool	Use truth or lies flexibly, whichever is more credible or useful; float conspiracy theories - convince or confuse.

Structural Elements: Adapting to the Internet-Driven Communication Space

Having established control over most state resources, institutions, and the machinery of government, the Georgian Dream regime has achieved an advanced form of state capture that is deeply rooted in Georgia's post-Soviet political culture. Yet, even this dominance does not translate into full command of the modern communication space. In today's Georgia, where the ruling party is just one actor within a hybrid environment heavily influenced and orchestrated by the Kremlin, the information ecosystem is too fragmented and the spread of independent voices is too persistent for an outright informational monopoly.

> ***Rather than striving for total control, the Georgian Dream and its Kremlin mentors focused on dividing society into hostile camps, flooding the arena with noise, and leveraging sophisticated technology and administrative power to amplify their narrative while stifling genuine debate.***

Instead, the regime adopted propaganda tactics best suited for the digital era by nurturing deep polarization and constructing an environment where competing narratives become virtually irreconcilable. Rather than striving for total control, the Georgian Dream and its Kremlin mentors focused on dividing society into hostile camps, flooding the arena with noise, and leveraging sophisticated technology and administrative power to amplify their narrative while stifling genuine debate. This approach is rooted in the foundational structural principles of Goebbels' propaganda machine, reimagined for an era of global connectivity, diminished democratic institutions, and ongoing ideological subversion.

A notable, Orwellian example of this machinery in action is the so-called Tsulukiani temporary investigative commission of the Georgian Dream Parliament Framed as an inquiry into the wrongdoings of the previous government, but functioning as a regime spectacle, the commission reliably produces content crafted explicitly for state-aligned propaganda channels. Its public hearings and dramatic accusations not only serve to create enemies and fabricate convictions against opposition figures but also provide a steady stream of "official" narratives and talking points used and recycled by TV, online media, and individuals loyal to the Georgian Dream. The Commission thus functions as a content farm, orchestrating spectacles while driving top-down messaging not only across the government's entire power vertical but also entire pro-governmental echo chambers.

Below, each of the structural elements is examined in detail with Georgia-specific examples illustrating how old authoritarian logic is translated into new methods of command and confusion:

Centralized Authority - The Georgian Dream regime sustains a highly centralized propaganda apparatus, tightly controlling major TV broadcasters (Imedi, Rustavi 2, POSTV), synchronizing narratives through editorial briefings and directives. These same narratives are amplified online through internet sources, including official party and party leaders' pages, coordinated Facebook networks, and swarms of bots and trolls, which flood social media with regime talking points, crowd out dissent, and manufacture a fictional consensus.

In line with reports about strategic narratives being jointly developed with or adapted from Moscow and then locally tailored by the regime's talking heads, the recent EU statement finally acknowledged that the Georgian Dream is involved in spreading Russian-style conspiracy theories and divisive narratives. Indeed, the regime's well-integrated, hierarchical vertical ensures that the

state-aligned, malign messaging reaches Georgians simultaneously via television, online news, and social platforms, reinforcing the dominance of the regime's perspective and leaving little room for independent or factual counter-narratives in the state-controlled communication space.

The epistolary letters from the Georgian Dream's political council and Bidzina Ivanishvili's statements leave no space for interpretation and define the message in stunning detail. The latest letter from the political council sets the tone for the key narrative of the momentum, instructs the subordinated channel about the nuances of the key message: "So, what is it that Georgia has failed to do that continuously subjects us to blackmail? Soon, our political team and Georgian society provided the answer themselves: "we did not get involved in the war, nor did we open a second front against Russia on our soil. It is precisely because of this stance that the then administration, led by the Global War Party, the same Deep State, decided to punish Georgia."

One-sided messaging remains central to the Georgian Dream's strategy. Pro-government TV and online media push uniform narratives, systematically excluding dissenting voices and omitting inconvenient truths that challenge regime interests. Manipulation of public outlook is evident in the regime's ferocious anti-Western rhetoric, passed alongside the work of the aforementioned parliamentary commission, effectively codifying Georgia's blame for the August War. This effort aligns the official storyline with Kremlin talking points, paving the way for the restoration of official ties with Russia.

A telling example of this approach is historical revisionism, notably the government's rewriting of school textbooks to recalibrate national values and reframe political interests through education. In addition to distorting facts and downplaying major scandals such as election rigging and Russia's creeping borderization, both of which are ignored or actively misrepresented, the Georgian Dream regime notably demonizes former President Mikheil Saakashvili and his administrations, even at the expense of national interests. This demonization goes beyond simply blaming him for starting the war; it seeks to rebrand his entire period of governance as anti-national and harmful to Georgia's national interest, arguing that it was a period of submission to the foreign influence of Western stakeholders. A striking instance of this is the same parliamentary investigative commission that goes beyond distorting reality by attempting to legally blame Saakashvili for starting the war. This maneuver serves a dual purpose: it strengthens the Georgian Dream's image as the guardian of peace while simultaneously creating a convenient scapegoat to blame for the country's problems. Meanwhile, critics of the regime continue to be branded "enemies" or "foreign agents," further consolidating the authoritarian narrative.

> ***The Georgian Dream has long refused to engage in debates with opponents, boycotted opposition media, and restricted opposition figures from appearing on outlets under its control. These measures have crystallized societal silos and fostered a state of perfect polarization with two irreconcilable echo chambers dominating public discourse.***

To reinforce its echo chamber, the Georgian Dream consistently presents only information that aligns with the official narrative and disseminates conspiracy theories to drown out facts, going so far as to deny even the most vivid and documented evidence that contradicts its propaganda. A recent example is Kobakhidze's outright denial of thousands of instances of proof regarding the regime's pro-Russian alienation, instead shifting blame onto the West and opposition for spreading "fake

news." Denying anything that challenges the regime's version of reality is a central tactic in their messaging. To facilitate such an environment, the Georgian Dream has long refused to engage in debates with opponents, boycotted opposition media, and restricted opposition figures from appearing on outlets under its control. These measures have crystallized societal silos and fostered a state of perfect polarization with two irreconcilable echo chambers dominating public discourse. This classic authoritarian strategy not only shields the regime from criticism but also ensures that only the ruling party's narrative prevails unchallenged.

Media control remains crucial for the Georgian Dream, which now dominates TV, radio, and expanding online channels through regulatory pressure and economic leverage. New laws empower the Communications Commission to sanction and throttle independent media while government-linked outlets receive privileged access and funding. Numerous targeted crackdowns on critical journalists during the recent protest rallies demonstrate the regime's ongoing effort to stifle dissent. As a result, despite pervasive online fragmentation, fear, self-censorship, and legal harassment restrict critical voices, allowing pro-government messaging to saturate Georgia's information space and further marginalize alternative perspectives.

The government's aggressive use of repressive legislation to muzzle criticism includes the recent move to freeze the accounts of independent media outlet Batumelebi, whose founder, Mzia Amaghlobeli, has become a symbol of the state's orchestrated repression against critical media voices after her Illegal incarceration.

The government's aggressive use of repressive legislation to muzzle criticism includes the recent move to freeze the accounts of independent media outlet Batumelebi/Netgazeti, whose founder, Mzia Amaghlobeli, has become a symbol of the state's orchestrated repression against critical media voices after her Illegal incarceration. At the same time, government-controlled media, such as Imedi TV and the public broadcaster, are allowed to continue uninterrupted operations while accumulating budgetary debts.

Exploiting modern technology has moved beyond Goebbels' use of radio to encompass digital tools, social media algorithms, and targeted advertising. These advancements enable rapid dissemination of messages to vast, diverse audiences, often in tailored forms that significantly increase emotional and cognitive impact. This technological leap allows for precision propaganda that was unimaginable in the twentieth century.

In Georgia, this is clearly illustrated by the regime's extensive use of Meta platforms to promote official narratives and discredit critics. Between January and April 2025 alone, just a handful of official government and pro-government media pages, including those of Irakli Kobakhidze, the Georgian Dream party, POSTV, and the Government of Georgia, collectively spent over USD 190,000 on Meta advertising for their official pages. The exact figures, available through Meta's public Ad Library, reflect only a portion of total expenditures and show how digital platforms are systematically used to saturate the information space with regime messaging. By paying to push content into users' feeds while presenting it as ordinary political communication, the government blends modern influence techniques with algorithmic targeting to distort public perception and suppress dissent.

Narrative Elements: Enduring Strategies for Message Development

Developing propaganda messages and their dissemination are inherently intertwined within a centralized process. However, unlike the structural adaptations required by today's digital landscape, the underlying principles related to message content and framing have remained remarkably consistent over time. These narrative strategies tap deeply into fundamental aspects of human psychology and are applied in almost identical ways today as they were decades ago.

> ***The Georgian Dream regime understands that complete ideological control is impossible in today's information environment. Instead, it focuses on behavioral control, ensuring that citizens refrain from protesting or supporting opposition parties, regardless of their beliefs or the information they hear.***

The essential focus is not on controlling what people believe but on shaping how they behave. Even Goebbels acknowledged that Nazi propaganda did not fully control the narrative or convert everyone's beliefs. His goal was to ensure that, regardless of their beliefs, people acted in accordance with the regime's expectations. Despite harsh penalties for listening to foreign broadcasts during the Nazi era, many Germans still consumed outside news. Similarly, the Georgian Dream regime understands that complete ideological control is impossible in today's information environment. Instead, it focuses on behavioral control, ensuring that citizens refrain from protesting or supporting opposition parties, regardless of their beliefs or the information they hear.

To enforce this, the regime has taken repression to a new level. Leaders of all major opposition parties remain imprisoned for reasons such as refusing to attend parliamentary committee hearings, which have become a tool for repression and propaganda. Additionally, charges against civil activists are pushed without any evidence presented, solely based on the testimony of the police officers, and disproportionate fines are imposed on anyone who publicly criticizes the government or participates in protests. Through these tactics, the regime seeks to neutralize dissenting behavior even if it cannot fully control private beliefs.

The principle of **simplicity** is paramount. Propaganda appeals directly to emotions, avoiding rational complexity to ensure messages are easily understood and remembered. By stripping away nuance, propaganda exploits cognitive shortcuts, effectively influencing large populations. The Georgian Dream frequently employs emotionally charged slogans and symbols, such as portraying itself as the protectors of Georgian sovereignty against "foreign threats" or "external interference"—messages repeatedly broadcast through various campaigns. For example, during election cycles, the party's core slogans revolve around false dilemmas such as choosing peace over NATO or preserving traditions over progress in EU integration. Those dilemmas are deliberately vague and simplify complex political realities in order to achieve emotional resonance. These narratives, coupled with pseudo-nationalist slogans, rally supporters who may not engage deeply with policy details but respond strongly to these straightforward emotional appeals.

> ***By identifying clear internal and external adversaries, the regime redirects public frustrations and fears, uniting audiences against perceived threats and justifying harsh actions against opponents.***

Vilification of enemies continues to serve a critical psychological function within the Georgian Dream's propaganda. By identifying clear internal and external adversaries, the regime redirects public frustrations and fears, uniting audiences against perceived threats and justifying harsh actions against opponents.

The Georgian Dream relentlessly pushes narratives framing the West as actively interfering to destabilize Georgia, reinforcing the regime's portrayal of foreign enemies orchestrating internal dissent. Opponents—especially the United National Movement and Mikheil Saakashvili—are not only depicted as political rivals but as agents of a so-called "global party of war" and part of a deep state conspiracy responsible for every problem facing the country. This portrayal unites the regime's supporters against a constructed enemy both inside and outside Georgia, deepening societal polarization.

For instance, Shalva Papuashvili's recent claim that Brussels "invented Saakashvili's dementia" and sought to free him through diplomatic pressure illustrates how the West is framed as actively meddling in Georgia's affairs. Alongside these political accusations, the Georgian Dream repeatedly condemns the West for promoting an obscene lifestyle and values that are portrayed as incompatible with Georgian traditions, further fueling cultural anxieties and justifying the regime's authoritarian measures. By constantly invoking these themes—the global war party, the deep state, and moral decay—the government creates a pervasive atmosphere of external threat to explain away its failings and rally its base around nationalist and anti-Western sentiments.

Continuous criticism is a key tactic in the Georgian Dream's propaganda arsenal. The regime ruthlessly attacks political opponents and dissenting voices in order to undermine their credibility and discourage others from speaking out. This sustained assault effectively clears the space for the regime's narrative to dominate. The strategy also involves bombarding Western stakeholders with accusations, blaming them for problems that the regime itself has caused. By constantly attacking challengers with aggressive narratives, such as one of the Georgian Dream's officials warning that "Ukraine has visa-free travel and candidate status but no longer has millions of young people or territories;" urging Georgians to reject "those who take a step against their own country," the regime maintains control over political discourse and deters meaningful opposition.

Repetition remains a cornerstone of the Georgian Dream's propaganda strategy. The constant reiteration of key slogans and accusations normalizes these ideas and embeds them deeply in the public consciousness, making them resistant to counterarguments. This article has presented many variations of one of the most relentless narratives of the regime, accusing opposition parties and Western actors of seeking to drag Georgia into war and threaten its identity. This central message has been saturating Georgia's communication space since Russia's full-scale war began in Ukraine. On 7 July 2025, in response to the EU's concerns over authoritarian consolidation in Georgia, illustrating the scale and intensity of orchestrated propaganda, this message is repeated *ad nauseam* across all channels with every official and messenger reinforcing it to instill fear and loyalty in the Georgian public's mindset.

The principle of **adaptation to events** reflects the dynamic nature of propaganda. Effective messaging is never static; it evolves rapidly to accommodate new developments, shifts in public sentiment, or external pressures. This flexibility helps maintain the propaganda's relevance and influence. The Georgian Dream quickly justifies every action in the name of the nation while adjusting its messages to fit current events. For example, in response to the European Union's recent conditioning of

visa liberalization on democratic reforms such as releasing political prisoners and repealing repressive laws, the regime doubled down on anti-Western propaganda. Mamuka Mdinaradze claimed that protests and EU skepticism stemmed from "authoritarian governance" and described the EU's stance as failed "blackmail," signaling a need for new, presumably more repressive, laws and tactics without abandoning core narratives. This example illustrates how the regime adjusts its propaganda to unfavorable developments while maintaining its core messaging.

The principle of **truth as a tool** captures the strategic and instrumental use of information in the Georgian Dream's propaganda. In this model, factual accuracy is secondary to political utility. What matters is not whether a statement is true but if it serves the regime's immediate objectives. As a result, truth, distortion, and outright fabrication are all used interchangeably, depending on what best supports the desired narrative at any given moment.

One of the most revealing aspects of this approach is the routine circulation of contradictory conspiracy theories. For instance, the Georgian Dream often claims that the so-called "global war party" or "deep state", usually a euphemism for the collective West, will abandon Georgia if it provokes Russia by opening a second front, just as they claim the West deserted Ukraine once the war began. At the same time, they insist that these very same Western powers are responsible for "arming Ukraine to the teeth" and deliberately fueling the war, accusing them of escalating the conflict for their geopolitical interests.

This dual messaging exposes the core inconsistency in the regime's communication. If the West is portrayed as having abandoned Ukraine, how can it simultaneously be held responsible for sustaining and escalating the conflict? If Western actors are considered a threat intent on dragging Georgia into war, why does the government continue to claim that European Union integration remains its central foreign policy goal after 2028? These mutually exclusive narratives are often circulated simultaneously, sometimes even within a single news cycle or official statement.

> ***The Georgian Dream's propaganda does not seek to convince the public through consistent logic or evidence. Instead, it aims to shape perception, deflect criticism, and shield the regime from accountability by blurring the line between fact and fiction.***

The purpose is not to offer a coherent worldview but to exploit different fears and resentments within the population. This strategy enables the regime to emotionally resonate with multiple audiences while disorienting and demoralizing critical thinkers. Confusion itself becomes a tool of control. In this context, the Georgian Dream's propaganda does not seek to convince the public through consistent logic or evidence. Instead, it aims to shape perception, deflect criticism, and shield the regime from accountability by blurring the line between fact and fiction.

How to Reverse the Tide?

The propaganda tactics employed by the Georgian Dream illustrate how Goebbels's legacy remains alarmingly relevant in today's digitally connected world. Through centralized control, emotional messaging, relentless repetition, enemy vilification, and strategic adaptability, the regime has reshaped Georgia's political landscape and eroded democratic institutions. These techniques are not relics of the past but active tools that have been repurposed and amplified by modern technology to dominate the public sphere. The Georgian

Dream's approach shows how propaganda continues to manipulate perception, sow division, and consolidate power.

Looking ahead, both domestic and international pro-democracy actors must acknowledge a brutal truth. Authoritarian regimes enjoy a structural advantage. Free from the constraints of democratic norms and accountability, they can deploy propaganda and repression without hesitation or oversight. In contrast, democratic responses have too often been slow, fragmented, and predictable. Despite substantial Western investment over the past two decades, efforts to counter authoritarian consolidation of disinformation in Georgia have had limited impact.

> ***To effectively challenge these regimes, democratic actors must shift from a reactive to an initiative-based approach. International partners should design their strategies based on a deep understanding of how authoritarian systems operate.***

To effectively challenge these regimes, democratic actors must shift from a reactive to an initiative-based approach. International partners should design their strategies based on a deep understanding of how authoritarian systems operate. Long-term support for independent media must be ensured through sustainable funding. At the same time, investment in digital resilience should remain a priority for equipping citizens with the skills to recognize and resist manipulation. However, the focus must be on developing and implementing strategies for responding to propaganda while consistently engaging in the modern-day cognitive warfare imposed on the democratic world by authoritarian actors without self-imposing artificial bureaucratic limitations ■

Crisis in Georgia – The EU Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Following the 15 July 2025 Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) meeting, held just before the EU's summer recess, the European Union once again warned the Georgian Dream government that visa-free travel—granted to Georgian citizens since 2017—may be suspended. This warning reflects the EU's view that visa liberalization remains one of the few remaining levers to steer Georgia back onto the European path. A day earlier, on 14 July, the European Commission sent a letter to the Georgian authorities reiterating the eight deliverables listed in its seventh visa suspension report from December 2024. The letter also set a firm deadline: by 31 August 2025, the Georgian Dream must report progress in implementing the recommendations—or at least explain what concrete steps it is taking.

This move signals that the EU has not yet given up on Georgia. But it also reveals a troubling reality: eight months after the Georgian Dream's Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced a suspension of the EU accession process, Brussels still lacks a coherent and forceful response. The threat to revoke visa-free travel is a high-stakes gamble, carrying reputational risks for both sides. The Georgian Dream must demonstrate to its base that it remains resolute in the face of Western pressure. Meanwhile, the EU must demonstrate that it is not merely a rhetorical power but one capable of real action—one that still stands with the Georgian people and can deter the regime's authoritarian drift.

> ***The EU must demonstrate that it is not merely a rhetorical power but one capable of real action—one that still stands with the Georgian people and can deter the regime's authoritarian drift.***

So far, the Georgian Dream's reaction has been defiant. Rather than engaging with the EU's requests,

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This illustration continues the visual narrative from our past article, drawn in the style peculiar to Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani.

it has intensified its disinformation campaign, portraying Brussels as forcing Georgia to choose between sovereignty, national identity, and visa-free access to Europe. There is no indication that the Georgian Dream regime plans to meet the EU's conditions. This puts the EU in a difficult bind. By September, it will have to choose: trigger the visa suspension mechanism, await the Commission's eighth report and its possible recommendation to revoke the visa-free status, or continue its pattern of strong words and weak responses. Crucially, the EU must also find a way to target its measures, punishing those in power without alienating the pro-European Georgian public.

The Way Ahead

With the 31 August deadline fast approaching, it is highly unlikely that the Georgian Dream will meet the European Union's demands. As of now, the ruling party has shown no political will to address the concerns raised in the Commission's letter. Instead, it has doubled down on disinformation, portraying the EU's conditions as a threat to Georgia's sovereignty, dignity, and identity. The Georgian Dream continues to spin a narrative that the EU is punishing Georgia for refusing to open a second front against Russia while simultaneously preparing for the political fallout that may follow a potential suspension of visa-free travel. The party appears confident that such a move would not provoke widespread public outrage since the benefits of visa liberalization are limited to a narrow segment of society.

Indeed, survey data support this view. According to the CRRC's 2023 Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward the European Union in Georgia, only 17% of the population reported having benefited from vi-

sa-free travel—up from 11% in 2021 and 9% in 2019. The majority of these beneficiaries are young people, often based in Tbilisi. Travel statistics to the EU and the Schengen zone also reveal moderate usage: 304,800 trips in 2019, 186,500 in 2022 (post-COVID), 333,900 in 2023, 378,500 in 2024, and 88,600 in the first quarter of 2025.

As a fallback, the Georgian Dream may attempt to pick the "low-hanging fruit" among the EU's demands—such as launching public awareness campaigns on the visa-free regime or drafting a nominal anti-corruption strategy. It might also consider tweaking or repealing the so-called "transparency of foreign influence" law, especially given that a much harsher Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) took effect in summer 2025, threatening civil society and independent media more dramatically than the 2024 "Russian law." However, there is no indication that the Georgian Dream will take meaningful action on the more substantial issues—such as reversing discriminatory legislation, safeguarding fundamental rights, or upholding protections for LGBTIQ persons. The Georgian Dream will certainly not repeal the legislative package on 'family values and protection of minors' and amend the national strategy and action plan on human rights to ensure that the rights of LGBTIQ persons are fully upheld. On the contrary, the party is using those very EU demands to fuel its propaganda machine, claiming that the EU seeks to impose "foreign values" and punish ordinary Georgians.

Ironically, this framing is partially reinforced by some opposition voices and civil society actors, who—while critical of the Georgian Dream—have also warned against suspending visa liberalization, arguing that the Georgian people should not suffer for the government's misdeeds. This further complicates the EU's position.

From Brussels' perspective, expectations should be low that the Georgian Dream will suddenly reverse course. Should it offer cosmetic compliance by addressing only superficial issues, the EU might be tempted to extend the timeline yet again. But if the party continues its current path of obstruction and anti-EU rhetoric, Brussels will face a tough decision after 1 September. The credibility of the EU's leverage—and its broader commitment to democratic conditionality—will be on the line.

At that point, the EU is likely to await the European Commission's eighth visa suspension report, expected in autumn 2025. If the report recommends triggering the suspension mechanism, the decision will fall to the Council and member states. Under current EU rules, there are four grounds for suspension:

- A substantial increase (over 50%) in the number of nationals refused entry or found staying illegally in the EU;
- A spike in asylum applications with low recognition rates (around 3-4%);
- A decline in cooperation on the readmission of returnees;
- A significant threat to public policy or internal security, particularly through increased serious crime involving nationals of a third country.

While the EU is still reluctant to penalize the population, it now faces the challenge of calibrating a response that targets those responsible for Georgia's authoritarian drift without alienating its pro-European citizens. Whether or not it succeeds in striking that balance remains to be seen.

New Grounds – The EU's More Effective Tool

In June 2025, the European Union—through an agreement between the Council and the European Parliament—adopted a significant update to the

rules governing visa-free travel. Four new grounds for triggering the suspension mechanism will be added to the existing ones, broadening the EU's ability to respond to emerging challenges. These include: (1) a lack of alignment between a third country's visa policy and that of the EU, especially if this creates irregular flows from other third countries due to geographic proximity; (2) the operation of investor citizenship schemes which grant passports to individuals with no real ties to the country in exchange for financial contributions; (3) hybrid threats and weaknesses in document security laws and procedures and (4) a deterioration in relations with the EU, particularly concerning human rights, fundamental freedoms, or serious violations of the UN Charter.

> ***The updated regulation empowers the EU to hold partner countries accountable not only for technical compliance but also for broader political behavior and alignment with European values.***

The core purpose of these changes is twofold: to address growing concerns among EU member states over irregular migration and to strengthen the use of visa liberalization as a political instrument. The updated regulation empowers the EU to hold partner countries accountable not only for technical compliance but also for broader political behavior and alignment with European values. This makes the visa-free regime a more strategic tool in the EU's foreign policy toolkit, allowing Brussels to respond to authoritarian backsliding, democratic erosion, and geopolitical friction—such as hybrid interference or human rights violations—even in the absence of traditional migration-related triggers.

Alongside these new criteria, the EU has also adjusted the thresholds that determine what constitutes a "substantial increase" in problematic indicators. Under the revised rules, a 30% rise in cases of refused entry, overstays, asylum applications, or serious criminal offences will suffice, down from the previous 50%. Similarly, the threshold for a "low" asylum recognition rate has been raised from 3-4% to 20%, giving the EU more latitude to act in situations where concerns may not meet the older, stricter benchmarks. These reforms mark a turning point: visa liberalization is no longer just a symbol of trust—it is a conditional privilege, subject to ongoing alignment with the EU's legal, political, and security standards.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

When it comes to the ongoing crisis in Georgia, the European Union finds itself between a rock and a hard place. As HRVP Kaja Kallas stated, the EU "does not want to hurt Georgian people and take away the visa-free regime... but at the same time, it's also an issue of credibility of the European Union." Given the nature of EU policymaking and the requirement of unanimity to impose targeted sanctions, the EU's toolbox remains limited. Unlike sanctions, suspending visa-free travel can be done by a qualified majority vote (15 member states representing 65% of the EU population).

Yet, most EU member states remain reluctant to suspend Georgia's visa-free regime fully. As it weighs this option, the EU must act cautiously and approach the issue from multiple dimensions. *First*, given the wave of disinformation pushed by the Georgian Dream, the EU will need a clear and direct communication strategy to reach out to Georgian citizens and explain the rationale behind its decision. *Second*, the EU must shift from a reactive posture to a proactive one—setting its own agenda rather than responding to the Georgian Dream's narrative. *Third*, it must consider the fate of human rights defenders and protesters who may be forced to flee the country; revoking visa-free travel would only compound their vulnerability and strengthen the ruling party's repressive toolkit. *Fourth*, in the event of full suspension, the growing anti-immigration mood in many EU member states could make

it nearly impossible for any future pro-European Georgian government to restore the visa waiver. *Fifth*, the EU faces a strategic dilemma: suspending visa-free travel for a country that holds candidate status could set a damaging precedent. *Sixth*, the EU is racing against time—the pro-European majority in Georgia expects the EU not only to stand by Georgia but to act swiftly and decisively.

> ***The EU could consider a more calibrated approach: restricting visa-free travel for specific categories of Georgian citizens.***

To navigate this delicate terrain, the EU could consider a more calibrated approach: restricting visa-free travel for specific categories of Georgian citizens. Article 8 of EU Regulation 2018/1806 allows the European Commission to propose suspending visa-free travel for "certain categories of nationals of the third country concerned, by reference to the relevant types of travel documents and, where appropriate, to additional criteria." When defining these categories, the regulation urges that they be "broad enough to efficiently contribute to remedying the circumstances." This option, combined with upcoming revisions to the visa suspension rules, would enable the EU to limit visa-free access for those directly responsible for undermining fundamental rights and harming EU-Georgia relations—potentially including decision-makers and their family members. Such an approach would preserve the pro-European aspirations of the broader Georgian population while targeting those derailing the country from its European trajectory.

At the same time, the EU must act with caution and precision when identifying which categories will be affected. Messaging will also be critical: the EU should clearly communicate that the suspension process involves multiple institutions and is inherently lengthy. Georgians must understand that while the EU is acting, results should not be expected overnight. This careful balancing act—between credibility, justice, and solidarity—will shape not only the EU's stance on Georgia but its broader ability to enforce conditionality in its neighborhood.

Message Matters

No matter what the decision by the EU regarding the suspension of the visa liberalization, it is essential that the public outreach is robust and the message is smart and to the point.

> ***Brussels should make clear that visa liberalization was earned by the Georgian people—not their government—and that its suspension is a direct consequence of the Georgian Dream's deliberate dismantling of democratic institutions and suppression of fundamental rights.***

The European Union must not allow the Georgian Dream's false dilemmas and anti-Western narratives to frame the visa-free travel debate. Instead of engaging in debates such as those over "LGBTQ propaganda" or "war vs. peace," the EU's messaging should remain clear, consistent, and people-centered. As public opinion data show, 75% of Georgians believe the loss of visa-free travel would be harmful, while a vast majority still support EU integration despite the government's provocations. The EU must speak directly to these citizens, not to the ruling elite. Brussels should make clear that visa liberalization was earned by the Georgian people—not their government—and that its suspension is a direct consequence of the Georgian Dream's deliberate dismantling of democratic institutions and suppression of fundamental rights.

This narrative must emphasize that the EU does not wish to punish Georgians but rather seeks to protect the integrity of its democratic values. The

message should be anchored in empathy and solidarity: the EU continues to welcome Georgians but cannot overlook the repressive laws, political imprisonments, and erosion of judicial independence orchestrated by the ruling authorities. The EU should stress that the eight recommendations are not technocratic ultimatums but shared standards that Georgians themselves overwhelmingly endorse. Visa-free travel, in this light, becomes not just a policy benefit but a reflection of shared values—values currently under siege in Tbilisi.

> ***The EU must avoid being dragged into reactive, defensive posturing. There is no need to counter every smear or conspiracy pushed by pro-government media. Instead, the EU's message should stay focused on a proactive affirmation.***

Finally, the EU must avoid being dragged into reactive, defensive posturing. There is no need to counter every smear or conspiracy pushed by pro-government media. Instead, the EU's message should stay focused on a proactive affirmation: Georgia's future belongs in Europe and the EU stands with the Georgian people in their pursuit of freedom, dignity, and opportunity. It is the Georgian Dream—not Brussels—that threatens that future. Suspending visa-free travel would be a tragic consequence of autocratic regression, not European abandonment. The EU's credibility demands that it remain principled, but its communication must remain human, hopeful, and unmistakably aligned with the will of the Georgian people ■

South Caucasus Meets the Middle East

In recent years, the geopolitics of the Middle East, the South Caucasus, the Black Sea, and Central Asia have become increasingly intertwined, characterized by overlapping security dynamics, shifting alignments, diverse regime types, and broader geopolitical shifts. Conflicts such as the Gaza War, the Iran-Israel confrontation, and Israeli strikes on Syria have reinforced this trend, turning the South Caucasus and the Middle East into an increasingly interconnected regional security complex.

> ***The South Caucasus and the Middle East are increasingly forming a single, bi-regional security complex.***

According to Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, a regional security complex is shaped by patterns of amity and enmity in which states' actions directly impact others within the same region. Security threats and opportunities are interdependent, making it impossible to treat any state's concerns in isolation. This paper argues that the South Caucasus and the Middle East are increasingly forming a single, bi-regional security complex.

Two key drivers underpin this development: the erosion of Russia's dominance in the Caucasus, paralleled by a waning Western influence, and the rise of regional middle powers that operate across both regions, filling the vacuum and reshaping the competitive and cooperative landscape.

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South Caucasus: From 'Near Abroad' to the Near East

The post-Cold War regional order in the South Caucasus, which held until the war in Ukraine, was shaped by Russian dominance and its rivalry with the West. Moscow viewed the South Caucasus as part of its "near abroad"—a traditional sphere of influence—and pursued a two-pronged strategy: cultivating levers of influence over Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, often by manipulating ethnic conflicts and countering perceived Western encroachment, notably the EU's Eastern Partnership and Georgia's NATO and EU ambitions.

In response, the South Caucasus states developed diverging foreign and security policies. Georgia sought protection through integration with the West; Armenia relied on Russia for security against Azerbaijan and Türkiye, while Azerbaijan remained non-aligned, deepening its ties with Türkiye. These trajectories produced two broad regional alignments: a Russia-Armenia-Iran axis favoring the status quo and a more West-leaning Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye axis, with Georgia at the forefront of Euro-Atlantic integration, backed by Ankara.

Russia's prolonged war of aggression against Ukraine has stretched its strategic bandwidth, prompting a reassessment of priorities and a recalibration of its relations with regional actors such as Türkiye and Iran. Moscow has come to rely on Iran for military support and on Türkiye's balancing act between the West and Russia, shifting the balance of power in these bilateral relationships. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh has further solidified the Azerbaijan-Türkiye axis as a credible counterweight to Russia's previously uncontested regional dominance. Russia's main gain in the region has been Georgia's move away from its traditional pro-Western foreign policy, with Tbilisi joining Moscow in pushing back against the West and its democracy promotion agenda.

> ***The EU's inability to halt Georgia's geopolitical U-turn and democratic backsliding, despite granting it candidate status, is a sign of its waning leverage and declining regional influence.***

The EU's inability to halt Georgia's geopolitical U-turn and democratic backsliding, despite granting it candidate status, is a sign of its waning leverage and declining regional influence. Moreover, the EU's Eastern Partnership, once encompassing all three South Caucasus states, has largely lost momentum. Only Armenia is actively seeking closer ties with the West as part of a strategy to diversify its foreign and security partnerships. However, Yerevan seeks not to replace its dependence on Russia but to build a network of balancing relationships to regain autonomy. With Georgia turning away from the West, Armenia's room for maneuver is increasingly constrained.

As a result of these shifts, the previously bifurcated regional order—mainly defined by the rivalry between Russia and the West—is giving way to a more fragmented landscape marked by overlapping patterns of competition and cooperation. The growing influence of Türkiye, rising tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan, and deepening ties between Azerbaijan and Israel are key developments that increasingly bind the South Caucasus to the Middle East. The recent escalation of the Iran-Israel conflict reverberated in both Baku and Yerevan, albeit in different ways, highlighting how developments in the Middle East affect states in the South Caucasus.

In bilateral and trilateral relations among Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran, the Middle East and the South Caucasus now function less as distinct regions and more as a single strategic space. Disputes and co-

operation in one area often spill over into the other. During and after the Nagorno-Karabakh war, for instance, Türkiye and Russia explored the idea of a structured engagement framework—mirroring their earlier coordination in Syria via the Astana and Sochi formats with Iran—although without success.

The emergence of the 3+3 format—bringing together Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and the three South Caucasus states—reflects a trend toward regionalized multilateralism that blurs the boundary between the two regions. Georgia remains the only country to officially decline participation, citing Russia's involvement and U.S. opposition, which views the initiative as sidelining Western influence. However, given Georgia's recent foreign policy shift and growing antagonism towards the U.S. and the EU, its participation in the 3+3 format can no longer be ruled out, less for strategic gain than to counter the perception of diplomatic isolation surrounding the Georgian Dream government.

Emerging Bi-Regional Security Complex

One of the defining characteristics of a regional security complex is its tendency to securitize issues that traditionally fall outside the realm of hard security. In both the South Caucasus and the Middle East, one such issue is the presence of cross-border ethnic minorities, which creates what Rogers Brubaker terms a "triadic nexus" involving the minority community, the state of residence, and a kin-state.

The complex and securitized dynamics of sectarian and ethnic relations continue to define the geopolitical landscape of both regions. These dynamics foster mutual suspicion, territorial claims, and enduring insecurity. Mistrust in the political and identity aspirations of domestic minorities often extends to suspicion of neighboring states' geopolitical ambitions. In this context, the "triadic nexus"—linking a minority, the state in which it resides, and a kin-state—shapes not only state-society relations and questions of national identity but also alignment patterns, regional priorities, and engagement with external actors. As a result, domestic political order is intimately tied to regional order, just as national identity becomes inseparable from a state's geopolitical positioning.

Iran's strained relationship with Azerbaijan stems in part from concerns over irredentism linked to its sizable Azerbaijani population in the north, despite their general integration and low risk of separatism. Tehran remains wary of rising Azerbaijani-Turkish influence in the Caucasus, in part due to their shared linguistic and identity ties. In turn, Armenia has sought to align with Russia and Iran to counterbalance the perceived threat from Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Both Moscow and Tehran oppose Ankara and Baku's "Turkic world" narrative, which they see as undermining their regional roles. The recent Iran-Israel escalation has further intensified Tehran's fears—not only of regime change but of potential fragmentation along sectarian and ethnic lines.

> ***Since Russia invaded Ukraine, a new wave of Russian migrants has settled in Armenia, Georgia, and Türkiye. While Moscow has not yet sought to instrumentalize this diaspora, concerns remain given its history of using Russian communities abroad to pressure smaller states.***

Tensions between states and minority groups have long shaped conflict in the region, with unresolved disputes such as Abkhazia, the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, and, until recently, Armenia-Azerbaijan continuing to influence regional geopolitics. The presence of Armenian and Georgian com-

munities in Türkiye adds further complexity to an already intricate ethno-political landscape. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, a new wave of Russian migrants has settled in Armenia, Georgia, and Türkiye. While Moscow has not yet sought to instrumentalize this diaspora, concerns remain given its history of using Russian communities abroad to pressure smaller states.

In Georgia, both Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities remain poorly integrated with limited proficiency in the state language, making them vulnerable to political influence from their respective kin states—and Russia. In this context, bilateral tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan risk spilling over into Georgia, where their kin minorities reside. Tbilisi has long feared that deteriorating relations between Yerevan and Baku could reverberate domestically, potentially drawing Georgian citizens of Armenian and Azerbaijani descent into broader regional disputes.

Ethno-sectarian tensions often resurface during periods of state fragility, driving pressures for fragmentation. In Iran, potential instability raises the prospect of refugee flows into Türkiye and Azerbaijan, sparking contentious debates around national and religious identity and fueling fears of state collapse. Such a scenario could have destabilizing effects not only on the Middle East and the South Caucasus but also beyond. If Israel continues its efforts to destabilize Iran by exploiting ethnic and sectarian divides, the reverberations are likely to be felt across both regions. In these conditions, the boundary between soft and hard security blurs, with identity questions increasingly framed as national security concerns. This dynamic erodes prospects for regionalism and prevents the formation of a coherent regional order. As distinctions between high and low politics vanish, even cooperation on technical or functional matters becomes hostage to unresolved strategic disputes. Consequently, both regions remain defined by fragmentation, overlapping alliances, and multi-layered rivalries.

Geopolitics of (Inter) Regional Connectivity

Another increasingly securitized area linking the South Caucasus and the Middle East is connectivity. Competing regional actors back rival infrastructure projects, transforming connectivity from a potential driver of cooperation into a source of geopolitical competition. Nonetheless, efforts persist to identify mutually beneficial solutions that align with national security interests. Iran, for example, has promoted "connectivity diplomacy" to ease tensions with Azerbaijan and identify common ground. Meanwhile, Armenia has advanced its Crossroads of Peace initiative, seeking to overcome its isolation from major transit routes and to leverage its geographical position to promote sustainable peace through economic interdependence. Georgia has invested in enhancing its transit potential and developing trilateral cooperation with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, seeking not only financial benefits but also, and perhaps more importantly, utilizing it as a security guarantee.

> ***Normalization among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye would weaken Russia's regional leverage, especially over Armenia, its most vulnerable partner.***

The Iran-Israel conflict risks undermining the International North-South Transport Corridor, jointly backed by Russia and Iran as a counterweight to the Middle Corridor. If tensions spill over into Iraq—though this has not yet occurred significantly—it could also jeopardize the Iraq Development Road project. These setbacks would further enhance the strategic appeal of the Middle Corridor. Meanwhile, the ongoing rapprochement between Türkiye and Armenia, along with the thaw in

Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, creates a favorable climate for Armenia's inclusion in regional connectivity efforts. Normalization among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye would weaken Russia's regional leverage, especially over Armenia, its most vulnerable partner. It would also reduce Georgia's strategic advantage as a sole transit route, previously enabled by Armenian-Azerbaijani hostility. This shift may prompt Georgia to move closer to Russia as the Georgian Dream government seeks new sources of revenue and diplomatic backing.

One of the most contested and securitized transit routes is the so-called Zangezur Corridor, which would link Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenian territory. The issue encapsulates the region's complex geopolitical landscape, touching on the competing security interests of multiple actors. Azerbaijan and Türkiye support the opening of the corridor while Armenia opposes it, fearing a loss of sovereignty and heightened security risks. Russia initially backed the proposal, hoping to deploy its border guards along the route to regain influence. However, Moscow has since accepted Tehran's demarche against the Zangezur project—at least temporarily—prioritizing its wartime partnership with Iran. Tehran is particularly alarmed by the corridor, viewing it as an attempt to expand Turkish influence in the region further and undermine its position in east-west transit. Tehran also fears that the proposed corridor will be used as a tool of containment by Türkiye and its Western allies. The recent U.S. proposal to resolve the dispute by outsourcing the corridor's management to a private American company was viewed in Tehran as part of Washington's broader Middle East strategy aimed at encircling and weakening Iran.

Shifting Regional Alignments

The geopolitical order of the South Caucasus is increasingly shaped by the evolving interplay between Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, with developments in the Middle East influencing their positions and the regional balance of power. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria has boosted Türkiye's geopolitical weight, especially vis-à-vis Russia and Iran. Since the 7 October attacks, Iran's regional standing has weakened further due to its escalating confrontation with Israel and the reduction of its proxy network. This has directly impacted Armenia, which has long relied on Iran to counterbalance Azerbaijan and resist the Zangezur Corridor project. In response, Yerevan has actively pursued normalization with Türkiye while cautiously re-engaging with Russia, as evident in Prime Minister Pashinyan's historic visit to Istanbul and the resumption of dialogue between the Armenian and Russian foreign ministers.

> ***As Iran's influence wanes, the rivalry between Türkiye and Russia is likely to intensify with both seeking to fill the emerging power vacuum.***

As Iran's influence wanes, the rivalry between Türkiye and Russia is likely to intensify with both seeking to fill the emerging power vacuum. Meanwhile, Türkiye's growing geopolitical alignment with the West is expected to deepen Russian suspicions about Ankara's ambitions, prompting Türkiye to accelerate its normalization with Armenia as part of a broader strategy to consolidate its influence across the South Caucasus by cultivating ties with all three regional states.

Middle Eastern conflicts have also reshaped alignment patterns in the South Caucasus. Iran was likely frustrated by the limited support it received from Russia during its 12-day war with Israel—an experience that may strain their bilateral ties. In contrast, Israel's partnership with Azerbaijan has deepened since 7 October, while Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations remain strong despite divergent views on Israel and Gaza. These dynamics have intensified Iran-Azerbaijan tensions, and if Tür-

kiye-Armenia and Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization continue, Iran's regional alignment strategy would suffer further setbacks. Although mutual dependencies may sustain a modus vivendi between Moscow and Tehran, as well as between Tehran and Yerevan, these relationships are increasingly defined by mutual distrust. The deepening Israel-Azerbaijan partnership also poses long-term challenges for Iran, extending beyond security into domestic politics and identity, given the emotional and cultural resonance between Azerbaijan and Iran's significant Azeri minority.

Despite its deep-rooted suspicion of the Baku-Tel Aviv axis, Tehran is likely to seek improved ties with Azerbaijan and redefine its role in the South Caucasus. This would not mark a shift in Iran's traditional strategic goals but rather a pragmatic recalibration aimed at managing tensions and reclaiming influence in light of recent setbacks, including the weakening of its proxy network, Assad's downfall, its direct conflict with Israel, and its diminished regional role. These developments may prompt Iran to adopt a new neighborhood policy aimed at restoring its relevance and bolstering regional stability.

Following the restoration of its territorial integrity, Baku feels emboldened and ascendant, seeking a greater role across both the South Caucasus and the Middle East. Reflecting its deepening ties with Israel, Azerbaijan has positioned itself as a diplomatic hub between Tel Aviv and regional actors. Amid heightened tensions between Türkiye and Israel, Baku hosted officials from both countries who agreed on a deconfliction mechanism in Syria, now a zone of growing geopolitical rivalry between Ankara and Tel Aviv. Additionally, Baku hosted Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and reportedly facilitated meetings between his delegation and Israeli officials. Azerbaijan is thus serving as a platform for Middle Eastern diplomacy, while the reverse is also taking place: the UAE recently hosted Azerbaijani President Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan, underscoring the growing interconnection between the two regions across security, diplomacy, energy, and economic affairs.

Fragmented and Multi-Layered

The merging of the South Caucasus and the Middle East into a single regional security complex signals the emergence of a new geopolitical architecture—fluid, multi-layered, and defined by overlapping spheres of influence rather than binary alignments. As traditional power hierarchies erode, regional middle powers like Türkiye, Iran, and increasingly Azerbaijan are filling the void, reshaping patterns of diplomacy, conflict, and cooperation. The decline of Russian hegemony, the West's faltering leverage, and Iran's growing vulnerabilities have opened space for new actors and alignments but have also raised the stakes of regional competition.

> ***The deepening ties between Middle Eastern and South Caucasian actors are giving rise to a dense web of competition in which alliances are volatile, risks are compounded, and domestic instability easily reverberates across borders.***

This convergence is not producing a stable order but rather a fragmented and multi-layered security environment where hard and soft threats intersect, where identity politics shape grand strategy, and where connectivity itself is increasingly securitized. The deepening ties between Middle Eastern and South Caucasian actors are giving rise to a dense web of competition in which alliances are volatile, risks are compounded, and domestic instability easily reverberates across borders. Understanding this emerging bi-regional security architecture is crucial not only for local actors but also for Western powers seeking to engage with or contain its consequences ■

Familiar Script, New Stage: Russia's Covert Campaign in Support of Armenia's Counter-Revolution

In recent weeks, amid escalating tensions between Russia and Azerbaijan, the South Caucasus has entered an unprecedented phase. For the first time, Moscow appears to be simultaneously waging hybrid warfare against both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Kremlin's posture, marked by heightened anxiety, seems driven by the prospect of Baku and Yerevan nearing a peace deal independently of Russian mediation—something unseen since the late 1980s. The direct meeting between President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Abu Dhabi on July 10, 2025, along with Pashinyan's visit to Türkiye, his talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the subsequent positive developments, have effectively sidelined Moscow and visibly unsettled it.

This nervousness peaked when the United States proposed that control over the so-called Zangezur corridor be assumed by a private American company—a suggestion publicly conveyed to the conflicting sides by the U.S. ambassador in Ankara. This move helped eliminate the last major obstacle in the peace talks. While unprecedented, the situation brings to mind a familiar observation I often heard during my travels to Armenia and Azerbaijan in the 2000s and 2010s: when asked which side Russia supported in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the accurate reply was that Russia supported the conflict itself—not the parties. That insight now seems more relevant than ever.

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THORNIKE GORDADZE
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In this hybrid war, Russia clearly retains greater leverage over Armenia than over Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is significantly less dependent on Moscow, enjoys comparatively strong and stable alliances, is immune to energy-related coercion, and lacks any meaningful pro-Russian political opposition. This article will therefore concentrate more on Armenia, which—despite Pashinyan's Western pivot—remains more vulnerable to Russian pressure. In Armenia, Russia is employing a full spectrum of non-kinetic warfare tools, along with active measures that have been refined and tested over time, particularly in Georgia, which has served as a laboratory for Russia's hostile tactics since the 1990s.

Russia's Strategic Patience to Topple Nikol Pashinyan

From the outset, Russia viewed Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution with suspicion. The protests resembled the kind of color revolutions Moscow typically resists in its "near abroad." Pashinyan's rise triggered fears that he might steer Armenia westward; yet, he avoided calls to leave Russian-led blocs, such as the EAEU or CSTO, and stressed foreign policy continuity—calming initial Russian concerns.

> ***Adopting a "wait-and-see" approach, Moscow worked behind the scenes to weaken Pashinyan.***

Unlike its reactions to Ukraine or Belarus, Moscow didn't intervene in Armenia, banking on Yerevan's isolation and reliance on Russian security guarantees. But doubts persisted. Putin remained uneasy about Pashinyan's civil society ties, anti-oligarch rhetoric, and potential democratic spillover. Russia responded by reinforcing influence through the church, military, business elites, gas pricing, infrastructure control, and propaganda. Adopting a "wait-and-see" approach, Moscow worked behind the scenes to weaken Pashinyan.

Cautious of former President Mikheil Saakashvili's fate in Georgia, Pashinyan moved slowly. Reforms were partial, elite renewal modest, and anti-corruption efforts limited, targeting only segments of the entrenched "akhperutyun" clans. Moscow tolerated Pashinyan until the 2020 war with Azerbaijan, when it withheld intervention and then brokered a ceasefire, gaining peacekeeper access to Nagorno-Karabakh. It blamed Pashinyan for the defeat and backed the opposition, but their unpopularity thwarted efforts to bring about regime change. Frustrated by Pashinyan's outreach to the West—especially in the EU monitoring mission and arms deals—Moscow stepped up pressure, while Armenia sought to diversify alliances.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine accelerated Armenia's pivot. Though still a CSTO member, Yerevan publicly criticized the bloc, skipped summits, and deepened ties with the West. Armenia began importing arms from India and France, replaced Russian guards at Yerevan's airport, and ratified the Rome Statute soon after the ICC's arrest warrant for Putin. For Moscow, these moves signaled a serious erosion of its grip over Armenia.

Coalition Against "Real Armenia"

Following the complete loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories in 2023—once again under the passive watch of Russian "peacekeepers"—Pashinyan moved toward a more decisive pivot to the West. He introduced the idea of the "Real Armenia," in contrast to the "Dream Armenia" imagined by nationalist forces, the Church, and much of the diaspora. "Real Armenia" is not just a geographical notion—referring to the current 30,000 km² Armenian state, without Nagorno-Karabakh or other irredentist claims—but also a deeper reflection on Armenian identity, the

idea of a modern Armenian nation, and its place in the world.

This "Real Armenia" mourns the loss of powerful historical myths, territorial aspirations, and the belief in a centuries-old alliance with Russia as protector. It calls for a crucial shift: reconciliation with Armenia's "Turkish" neighbors—Türkiye and Azerbaijan—and a renewed closeness with Europe, while maintaining Armenia's Eastern roots and its aspiration to serve as a bridge between East and West.

In this vision of "Real Armenia," there is little space for Russia. It is premised on breaking free from post-colonial and post-Soviet dependency on the former tutelary power. The insistence on clinging to Nagorno-Karabakh came at a steep cost—politically and economically—for Armenia's sovereignty. Now that Nagorno-Karabakh is lost—through what many see as Russia's betrayal—there is no compelling reason to sustain reliance on Moscow. Securing lasting peace with Azerbaijan, underpinned by Western and Turkish guarantees, has thus become a matter of national urgency.

The Russian Playbook in Action: Is Armenia 2025 a Replay of Georgia 2012?

It is often observed that Russia does not treat diplomacy as a primary tool of influence in its so-called "near abroad." For Moscow, diplomacy is reserved for adversaries or partners it deems worthy—such as Washington, major European powers, China, or India. Toward Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, or Armenia, however, diplomacy is replaced by brute force or, when that proves too costly, by "active measures": covert destabilization efforts, economic pressure, propaganda, and disinformation.

This playbook—Russia's toolkit for managing former Soviet republics—took shape over time. It has included notable failures, such as Georgia in 2003 or Ukraine more recently, where miscalculations ultimately led to military intervention. Still, many elements of this toolkit have proven relatively effective and are regularly used across the region.

In Armenia, the main forces working to destabilize Pashinyan's government include: the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC); billionaire Samvel Karapetyan and several other Russia-based Armenian oligarchs such as Ara Abramyan and Ruben Vardanyan (now imprisoned in Azerbaijan); the Armenian opposition, particularly the Republican Party and the ARF (Dashnak Party), both with pro-Russian leanings; as well as parts of the Russian-based Armenian diaspora, media personalities, and retired military and intelligence officials close to Moscow.

When examining these actors, the resemblance to the Georgian case is striking: the Church, a Russian-made billionaire entering politics, and old elites with Moscow ties—all coalescing against a reformist, Western-oriented leader. The ingredients are familiar, and the atmosphere is reminiscent of 2012.

Let's now take a closer look.

The Church and the Protection of "Traditional Values"

Russia's decision not to intervene during Armenia's 2020 military defeat was clearly aimed at sparking a public uprising and toppling Pashinyan through a kind of reverse Velvet Revolution. But the plan failed. Despite protesters storming his residence, Pashinyan held on and went on to win parliamentary elections, defeating a deeply unpopular and discredited opposition.

> ***Russia's decision not to intervene during Armenia's 2020 military defeat was clearly aimed at sparking a public uprising and toppling Pashinyan through a kind of reverse Velvet Revolution. But the plan failed.***

With the political opposition weakened, focus shifted to the Armenian Apostolic Church—widely seen as the most trusted institution in Armenian society. As a guardian of national identity that withstood centuries of foreign rule, the Church held strong symbolic power. As Russia's formal military and diplomatic clout in Armenia diminished, it increasingly viewed the Church as a valuable instrument of influence.

Church leaders blamed Pashinyan for the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and called for his resignation. The scenario echoed in Georgia in 2012, when the Orthodox Church helped unseat reformist President Saakashvili. Given similar levels of religiosity in both countries, the AAC's opposition to Pashinyan was expected to seriously undermine him. With the patriarch taking the lead, the Church was poised to become the core of a new resistance movement.

Since June 2025, Armenia has faced an institutional crisis without precedent. Pashinyan launched a direct attack on AAC leadership, accusing senior clergy of corruption and betrayal. The arrest of two high-ranking archbishops triggered outrage among religious communities and the opposition. The conflict turned personal and symbolic: Pashinyan labeled the clergy a "criminal-oligarchic" network, accused them of terrorism, and claimed they were plotting a coup in coordination with pro-Moscow elites. In response, Church figures and opposition voices branded him a "traitor," "a Turk," "a Muslim," or even an "MI6 agent." Moscow weighed in on June 30 with a statement of "official concern" from Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, aligning itself with Pashinyan's critics.

Like the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), the AAC serves as a key channel of Russian influence in the South Caucasus. Though canonically independent and not formally subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, both maintain close ties with the Moscow Patriarchate.

Consider the GOC: its current Catholicos-Patriarch, Ilia II, was educated in Russia (Zagorsk-Sergiyev Posad) and has met with President Putin—a rare honor, given that no Georgian president or prime minister has had such a meeting since 2008. His likely successor, Archbishop Shio, has deep roots in Moscow, having led the Georgian Church's Moscow-based diocese since 2001 and earned his doctorate from the St. Tikhon Theological Institute, which operates under the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate.

In the Armenian Church, similar connections exist. The brother of Catholicos Karekin II, Archbishop Ezras Nersisyan, heads the Armenian Diocese of Russia and has been instrumental in cultivating ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian state institutions, including the Kremlin and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2025, President Putin awarded Archbishop Ezras the prestigious Order of Alexander Nevsky for his role in strengthening religious cooperation within Russia.

Oligarchs with Russian Ties

The case of Samvel Karapetyan—a Russian-Armenian billionaire who built his business empire in Russia and later invested heavily in Armenia—is a textbook example of the Russian playbook at work. Karapetyan acquired significant assets, including the Electric Networks of Armenia and several large shopping centers in Yerevan. On June 18, Armenian authorities arrested him for publicly calling for the overthrow of the constitutional order, and the Parliament quickly passed legislation to national-

ize the Electric Networks, removing them from his control overnight.

Despite being based in Russia, Karapetyan has remained deeply involved in Armenian public life, maintaining close ties with political figures and the Armenian Apostolic Church. His investments and public statements have made him a visible figure, often aligned with pro-Russian and Church-supportive positions—leading to speculation that Moscow sees him as a key proxy for soft power in Armenia. The Kremlin has stated it is "closely monitoring" his legal case.

> ***Russia has long relied on oligarchs with roots in other post-Soviet states to project influence. These individuals often acquire strategic assets—such as energy, banking, media, and mining—giving them economic leverage and political clout in their home countries.***

Russia has long relied on oligarchs with roots in other post-Soviet states to project influence. These individuals often acquire strategic assets—such as energy, banking, media, and mining—giving them economic leverage and political clout in their home countries. Karapetyan's control over Armenia's electricity distribution network aligns perfectly with this model.

His case draws immediate parallels with that of Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia. Both men entered politics when opposition forces were in disarray and had no prior political background, which played to their advantage. Each had cultivated a public image as a generous philanthropist and Church benefactor, offering a clean and charitable contrast to the unpopular political establishment.

Notably, neither seemed drawn to politics for its own sake. Ivanishvili was famously reclusive—rarely photographed or interviewed before entering politics—and even after taking power, he avoided public engagements, revealing a distinct lack of charisma or public empathy. Karapetyan likewise avoided the spotlight until mid-2025, when he broke his silence to defend the AAC and issue political statements.

According to multiple sources familiar with both men before their political debuts, neither initially had political ambitions. Their decisions to enter politics were driven by pressure—fueled by fears of losing their fortunes or endangering their families. It is not hard to guess where that pressure originated.

Will Russia Be as Successful in Armenia as It Was in Georgia in 2012?

The answer to whether Armenia is heading down a Georgian-style path is far from certain, largely because key differences in both local and international context—along with lessons learned—set today's situation apart. Crucially, both the Armenian leadership and Western actors appear more aware of the Georgian precedent and its pitfalls.

Back in 2012, Bidzina Ivanishvili positioned himself as both a populist benefactor and a reformer—promising "restoration of justice," "free money," more democracy, an independent judiciary, and improved ties with Russia. These messages appealed to a Western audience weary of Saakashvili's excesses, as well as to an urban Georgian electorate. At the time, few in the West saw Ivanishvili's ascent as problematic. Many even welcomed it, naively believing the Kremlin-linked oligarch would de-escalate tensions with Moscow while keeping Georgia on a pro-European track. In hindsight, it's clear that Ivanishvili's pivot to Russia was carefully calculated and gradual.

Today, the context has fundamentally changed. In

Europe, illusions about Russia have largely evaporated. There is broad recognition that appeasing Moscow leads only to subjugation. Russia is now widely seen as a systemic threat—not just to its neighbors but to Europe's own security and democratic systems. No pro-Russian oligarch posturing as a conservative alternative to liberal democracy is viewed as a credible or acceptable partner.

In 2012, hybrid warfare was poorly understood in Europe. The term itself was unfamiliar, and Russia's methods, even after the 2008 invasion of Georgia, were under-analyzed. That is no longer the case. Europe today is far more attuned to the Kremlin's interference tactics, as demonstrated by the muted response to Romania's annulled 2024 election or the heightened awareness around Moldova's 2025 vote.

Pashinyan, it seems, has internalized these lessons. Though initially more cautious than Saakashvili, he now appears more determined. Unlike Saakashvili, who never dared to challenge the immense power of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Pashinyan has openly confronted the AAC, accusing its leadership of corruption and betrayal. In contrast, Saakashvili's restraint failed to win the Church's support, which ultimately sided with his pro-Russian rivals.

Nor did Saakashvili pursue legal action against powerful pro-Russian oligarchs. Ivanishvili's well-known Russian ties did not lead to prosecution—only a revoked citizenship, later reversed under EU pressure. At the time, Saakashvili knew that Western allies would not support bold moves against opposition figures, fearing democratic backsliding.

> ***Pashinyan, however, seems emboldened—because he believes the West now understands what's at stake.***

Pashinyan, however, seems emboldened—because he believes the West now understands what's at stake. His preemptive offensive against the Church and a Kremlin-aligned oligarch suggests he expects more tolerance from Western capitals than Saakashvili could count on in 2012.

There is also the factor of Russia's declining power. With its military bogged down in Ukraine and many tools of coercion weakened, Moscow's grip is looser. While Russia retains considerable leverage in Armenia—militarily, economically, and through media influence—some instruments are less effective. Notably, Russia has refrained from imposing economic sanctions on Armenia, despite Yerevan's increasingly unfriendly gestures. One reason is Armenia's crucial role as a hub for sanctions evasion since the Ukraine invasion—making it too strategically valuable to punish harshly.

The contrast is striking with Georgia. While Russia has held back against Armenia and even Azerbaijan—despite diplomatic tensions—it is the Georgian Dream government that has moved to block Armenian exports to Russia. This is all the more troubling given that roughly 80% of Armenia's imports and exports, including gas, transit through Georgia. Tbilisi's participation in Moscow's hybrid war, in this light, appears not just cynical but shameful.

A Different (Global) War Party

Among the many tools in the Russian playbook, one stands out for its failure in Armenia: the invocation of "peace." This narrative—so effective in Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and even parts of Europe—simply does not work in the Armenian context.

> ***Armenians have drawn a hard-earned conclusion over three decades of independence: Russia, and any supposed "friendship" with it—more accurately described as subordination—does not guarantee peace.***

Armenians have drawn a hard-earned conclusion over three decades of independence: Russia, and any supposed "friendship" with it—more accurately described as subordination—does not guarantee peace. Since the 1990s, Armenia has conceded almost everything to Moscow—strategic autonomy, military sovereignty, economic levers, and even elements of cultural identity. As a colleague from the Armenian diaspora once said, Armenia had become "Southern Kaliningrad with a UN seat." The phrase may sound harsh, but it captures the depth of Armenia's concessions. And yet, peace never came. Instead, Armenia suffered catastrophic wars in 2020 and 2023, losing both lives and territories it held sacred, while Russia stood by—passive and complicit. Over 130,000 people were displaced, and thousands of young men died in vain.

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As a result, the vast majority of Armenians no longer view Russia as a peace guarantor, and no political force associated with Moscow can credibly claim to be one. The idea, promoted by Russian media and segments of the Armenian opposition, that Russia would have protected Nagorno-Karabakh had Pashinyan not been in power, has gained little ground. Russia's abandonment of Armenia—whether due to unwillingness or inability to confront Azerbaijan—is now plain to see.

This may seem paradoxical to Georgian observers, where pro-Kremlin actors still peddle the "peace with Russia" line. But in Armenia, the opposite is true. The longing for peace is strong—perhaps even stronger than in Georgia—given the recent, traumatic wars. Pashinyan understands this. His push to normalize ties with Azerbaijan and Türkiye has positioned him as the most credible political figure capable of delivering lasting peace.

The opposition, by contrast, offers no viable peace strategy. Their rhetoric focuses on retaking Nagorno-Karabakh—a goal that, without another war against Azerbaijan (likely involving Türkiye), is unattainable. This allows the government to brand them as the "party of war," while portraying itself as the only force genuinely pursuing peace.

Avoiding Georgian Mistakes

Let us underscore a few key points.

First, it is essential to ensure that segments of the political class and broader public—those who are not pro-Russian but are critical of the government—do not become alienated and inadvertently pushed into alignment with Kremlin-backed forces. A wide range of political actors, journalists, and opinion leaders harbor concerns that Pashinyan's bold moves could signal the onset of authoritarian tendencies.

This situation echoes Georgia in 2012, when many pro-Western citizens backed the Georgian Dream out of frustration with democratic shortcomings under Saakashvili. Today, many of those same individuals regret that decision, recognizing that Ivanishvili's rule has caused far greater damage to democracy and civil liberties, while openly serving Moscow's interests and derailing Georgia's European aspirations.

To avoid a similar trajectory in Armenia, the government must maintain open dialogue with its critics. It is equally important to provide explicit assurances that measures taken in the name of countering Russian influence or preventing coups will not be used to undermine the rule of law or fundamental rights. If necessary, Western partners should be brought in to support this dialogue—ideally through regular, structured engagements where concerns can be raised and addressed.

The decision to hold the European Political Community (EPC) summit in Yerevan in spring 2026 sends a powerful message of European trust in Armenia. It is now up to the country to meet this moment with responsibility and resolve.

> ***If regional players like Azerbaijan and Türkiye are serious about curbing Russian dominance in the South Caucasus, they must support Armenia's efforts to break free from Moscow's grip.***

Finally, if regional players like Azerbaijan and Türkiye are serious about curbing Russian dominance in the South Caucasus, they must support Armenia's efforts to break free from Moscow's grip. That means concluding peace with Yerevan on terms that do not publicly humiliate Pashinyan, avoiding a backlash that could revive pro-Russian forces under the narrative of "Pashinyan the traitor" ■

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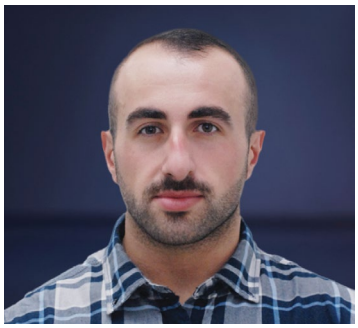

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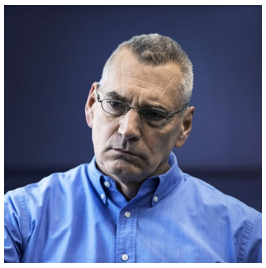

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GEOPOLITICS

Issue **№21**
August, 2025