

# GEO POLITICS

№13 | DECEMBER 2024

STARRING THE GEORGIAN DREAM

## PULP ELECTION

DIRECTED BY VLADIMIR PUTIN



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# **GEO POLITICS**

**Issue №13**  
**December, 2024**

# Our Mission

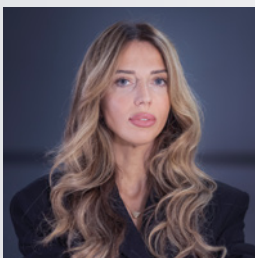
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual exchange, nurturing a communal space where each person can contribute meaningfully to the broader geopolitical discourse.

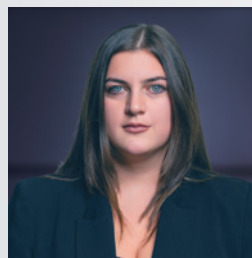
In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOPolitics* will echo the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia can and must contribute to disseminating universal democratic values and contribute to regional and international security. We aim to 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 will enrich the conversation about Georgia's foreign and security policy, unveiling and scrutinizing Georgia's relations with the EU, NATO, Russia, and other important geopolitical actors and international institutions. We will also investigate the ramifications of internal developments for Georgia's geopolitical role and foreign relations. By doing so, we will facilitate informed and substantial dialogue from, about and in Georgia.



**Ana Khurtsidze**

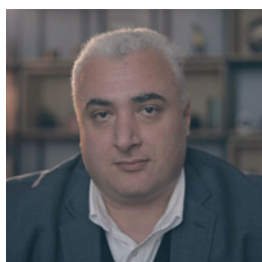
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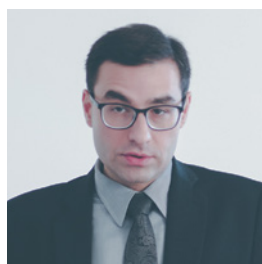
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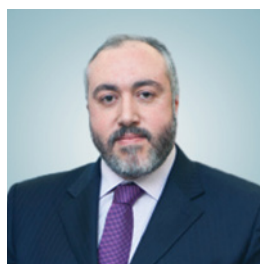
## Thornike Gordadze Contributor

Thornike Gordadze, a Franco-Georgian academic and former State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia (2010-12), served as the Chief Negotiator for Georgia on the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. From 2014 to 2020, he led the Research and Studies Department at the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies in Paris. A Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 2021 to 2022, he currently teaches at SciencesPo in Paris and is an Eastern Neighbourhood and Black Sea program fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute. Gordadze, also a Senior Researcher at the research institute Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Paris SciencesPo (2005).



## Shota Gvineria Contributor

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



## Temuri Yakobashvili Contributor

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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### **Jaba Devdariani** Contributor

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Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading the political office of OSCE in Belgrade from 2009 to 2011 and serving as the Director for International Organizations (UN, CoE, OSCE) at the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011-2012. Currently, as a volunteer co-editor for Europe Herald, a Civil.ge project (FB/@EuropeHerald), Devdariani dedicates his expertise to elucidating European current affairs for a broader audience.



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### **Vano Chkhikvadze** Contributor

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Vano Chkhikvadze is an EU Integration Programme Manager at Civil Society Foundation (CSF), specializing in EU-Georgian relations and advancing projects for Georgia's European integration. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.

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# Guest contributor

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### **Tefta Kelmendi** Guest Contributor

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Tefta Kelmendi is the deputy director for the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Her research centers on the EU's policies in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on EU enlargement and democracy promotion. It also incorporates security issues and protracted conflicts in the Western Balkans and select countries within the Eastern Neighbourhood. Kelmendi holds a Master's degree in International Security from Sciences Po - Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA). Her publications can be found [here](#).

# Pulp Elections Have Made Georgia's European Future Hang in Balance

**G**eorgia before October 26 and Georgia after November 28 are two different states. Before the October 26 elections, widely considered fraudulent because of massive violation of the secrecy of the vote, vote-buying, carousels, and misuse of administrative resources, the political atmosphere was tense; the Georgian Dream (GD) was fending off threats of sanctions from the West, in turn threatening the political persecutions and crackdown on political opponents, civil society organizations and media. Opposition parties, on the other hand, were gearing up for the elections and hoping to replace the Russia-leaning oligarch with a European-style coalition government.

However, the outcome of the elections sparked a spiral of events with the potential for severe civil confrontation. Unexpected 53% of the Georgian Dream prompted the opposition to boycott the election outcomes and withdraw from the Parliament, leaving the GD MPs alone in the chamber as a symbol of a one-party state. However, the major shock came on November 28, when Ivanishvili's government announced that it would not seek EU membership until 2028. This caused massive outrage and nationwide protests. The resistance, in turn, unleashed the worst demons that the authorities have concealed for years. The massive use of force against the demonstrators, *squadris-mo*-type informal groups beating up peaceful demonstrators and journalists, raiding party offices by "titushki", arbitrary arrests of the citizens just for wearing protective gear, arrest of political oppo-

nents, and usage of all administrative, judicial, and legal resources to silence the protests.

The confrontation between the Georgians seeking new elections and the reinstatement of Georgia on the European and democratic path with the Georgian Dream government, which relies on force and propaganda machinery, is ongoing as this issue sees the light. Whichever way the pendulum swings will determine the country's future for, possibly, the decades to come. Therefore, we have decided to focus this issue on the election outcomes, ongoing protests, and the current state of relations between Georgia and the West.

Sergi Kapanadze opens the journal with an analysis of Georgia's ongoing existential struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, catalyzed by the Georgian Dream's abandonment of EU membership aspirations and its systemic erosion of democratic norms and oligarchic state capture. The article reviews how the current protests differ from the previous ones and underscores what is at stake - either the country succumbs to GD's authoritarian grip or reclaims its democratic trajectory through decisive resistance. The article also calls for international support to counter Georgia's slide into autocracy, framing the outcome as critical for both the nation and broader democratic aspirations in the region.

Tefta Kelmendi looks at the ongoing Georgia protests from the prism of the European Union, calling on the EU leaders to adopt a more assertive stance

to counter Georgia's democratic backsliding. Highlighting Georgia's important role and its population's pro-European sentiment, the article critiques the EU's insufficient response to the rigged October 26 elections and escalating repression of protests. Kelmendi underscores the importance of sanctions against GD officials, high-level EU demands for new elections, and robust support for Georgia's civil society, media, and academic institutions. By taking decisive action, the EU can counter Moscow's influence, uphold democratic values, and reinforce its role as a credible partner in the region's geopolitical landscape.

Temuri Yakobashvili steps in with an analysis of the implications of Donald Trump's return to the U.S. presidency for Georgia. The article highlights Trump's consolidation of power and transformative potential as the 47th president. It examines how his foreign policy could reshape the global order, including its approach to Ukraine and the Middle East conflicts. For Georgia, whose current government aligns increasingly with a Russia-China-Iran axis, the analysis points to a potentially strained relationship with a Trump-led administration. The Georgian Dream's authoritarian drift, economic ties with sanctioned states, and anti-Western policies undermine trust with Western allies, leaving Georgia vulnerable to isolation unless significant internal political change occurs. Yakobashvili underscores the urgent need for the U.S. and EU to hold Georgian leadership accountable, emphasizing that without such action, the nation risks falling further into the orbit of authoritarian powers.

Jaba Devdariani examines Georgia's cultural and political shifts following the contested 2024 elections, framing them through the lens of Gramsci's "cultural hegemony" and the Overton window concept. The article explores how the Georgian Dream government has eroded the long-domi-

nant pro-European and democratic narrative, leveraging propaganda, economic dependence, and an illiberal worldview to appeal to a conservative, precarious population disconnected from the liberal elite. Highlighting the failures of Georgia's democratic proponents to engage with the broader society, the piece warns that solidarity and grassroots outreach are essential for reclaiming democratic ideals. While Georgia retains vibrant civic movements, the article underscores that its democratic future hinges on bridging societal divides and countering GD's narrative dominance.

Shota Gvineria continues analyzing the authoritarian transformation of Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party, highlighting its shift from pro-Western aspirations to openly anti-democratic and pro-Russian policies. Initially entering politics with promises of democratic renewal, Ivanishvili has reversed course, consolidating power by suppressing opposition, civil society, and media while framing loyalty to the regime as the foundation of a new social contract. The article details GD's anti-Western rhetoric, alignment with authoritarian powers, and revisionist narratives about Georgia's 2008 war, which undermined Georgia's territorial integrity and international partnerships. Gvineria warns of profound consequences for Georgia's sovereignty, democratic future, and regional stability if this trajectory continues, calling for robust Western support to counter GD's authoritarian pivot and support pro-democracy forces in Georgia.

Vano Chkhikvadze closes the issue with a deeper look into the waning prospects of Georgia's European integration. Drawing on the European Commission's 2024 enlargement report, the article highlights Georgia's backsliding in key areas, such as judiciary reform and alignment with EU foreign and security policies, contrasting this with the significant progress made by Ukraine and

Moldova. The EU's increasingly positive stance on enlargement, coupled with Georgia's resistance to implementing necessary reforms and anti-Western rhetoric, has widened the gap between Georgia and its regional peers. The author concludes that GD's decision to prioritize power consolidation over EU commitments jeopardizes Georgia's

long-standing European aspirations, likely relegating it to the margins of the EU's final wave of enlargement.

With Respect,  
**Editorial Team**



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# Mortal Kombat for Georgia's Future

**O**n November 28, Georgian Dream (GD) unilaterally [dismantled](#) Georgia's path to EU membership in clear violation of the Constitution, triggering mass protests. While the outcome remains uncertain, the stakes are unequivocal—this is a zero-sum confrontation for Georgia's future. Either the country succumbs to full authoritarianism, mirroring Russia and Belarus, or reverses course toward democracy and European integration. In this battle, there will be a casualty: if GD prevails, democracy, civil society, free media, and political opposition will be eradicated. If GD falls, Bidzina Ivanishvili and his inner circle will lose their impunity, prosperity, and possibly prosecution.

These protests did not emerge from a vacuum but from years of democratic erosion. In the weeks leading up to November 28, Ivanishvili's regime doubled down on its authoritarian playbook. Elections were [rigged](#) through ballot secrecy violations, vote-buying, and elaborate carousels, delivering an engineered 53% victory to GD. When opposition parties and the president challenged

the results, a Constitutional Court stacked with GD loyalists, [dismissed](#) the appeal, granting legitimacy to the Parliamentary session, which was convened without opposition representation. Ignoring international observers' critiques, GD rubberstamped its government and escalated repression against political opponents, civil society, and the media.

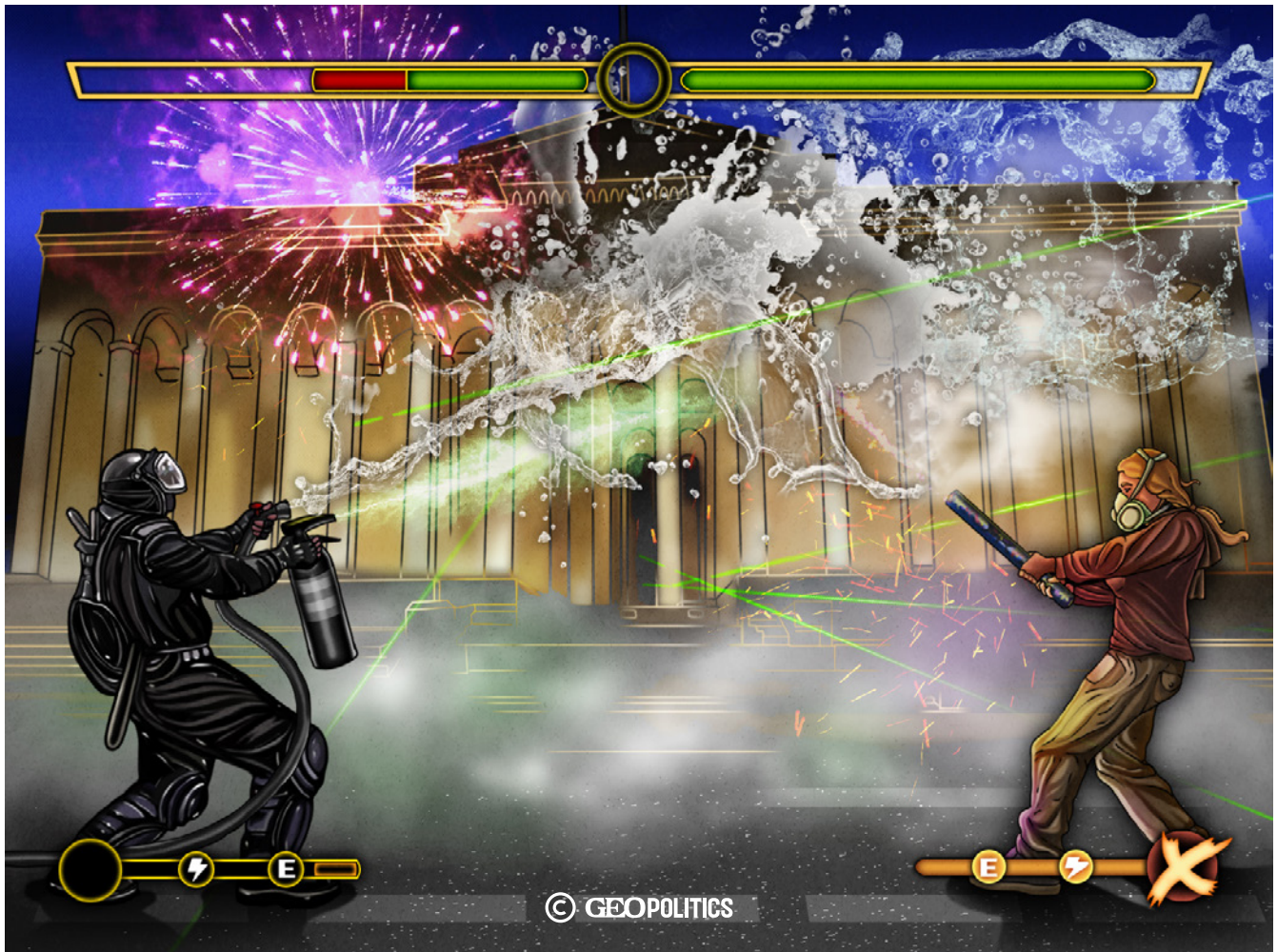
The November 28 announcement by Irakli Kobakhidze that Georgia would abandon its EU membership ambitions marked the culmination of this authoritarian entrenchment. Although Kobakhidze claimed GD would continue implementing the Association Agreement and DCFTA, these instruments, widely recognized as insufficient for EU accession, were misleadingly touted as adequate alternatives.

***Spontaneous, horizontal protests erupted nationwide, transcending traditional political affiliations. On the evening of November 28, the initial gathering near Parliament drew just a handful of outraged citizens.***



**SERGI KAPANADZE**  
Editor and Contributor

Dr Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International relations and European integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Kapanadze is a Senior Researcher and Head of the International Relations Department at the research institute Gnomon Wise. He is a founder and a chairman of the board of the Tbilisi - based think - tank GRASS (Georgia's Reforms Associates). Dr Kapanadze was a vice - speaker of the Parliament of Georgia in 2016 - 2020 and a deputy Foreign Minister in 2011 - 2012. He received a Ph.D. in International relations from the Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.



The public's response, however, defied expectations. Spontaneous, horizontal protests erupted nationwide, transcending traditional political affiliations. On the evening of November 28, the initial gathering near Parliament drew just a handful of outraged citizens. Within hours, the crowd swelled to 50,000—a number that has remained steady, fueled by grassroots outrage and a shared resolve to resist GD's betrayal. All opposition political forces coordinated but not unified under the leadership of President Salome Zourabichvili are on the same page – resist the GD or be destroyed.

At its core, this confrontation is the product of Ivanishvili's oligarchic system—a gamble to centralize power at the expense of Georgia's democratic identity. Since 2012, and especially after 2020, the Georgian Dream has systematically consolidated power by [capturing](#) key state institutions and sidelining constitutional processes, which are

often [highlighted](#) in this journal. The judiciary, regulatory bodies like the Central Election Commission, and state institutions have all been brought under party control. One of the few institutions still maintaining some autonomy, the presidency, is set to lose it with the imminent appointment of a party-aligned former football player without formal education.

The stakes are existential, not just for the regime but for the Georgian people. Should Ivanishvili prevail, the country will lose the institutions and freedoms that have defined its modern European aspirations. If the protests succeed, it could begin Georgia's return to democracy and its rightful place in Europe. One thing is clear: the nation is at a breaking point, with no path forward that spares either Ivanishvili or the Georgian people from a decisive reckoning.

## Different Kind of Resistance

**Georgia's history with protests on Rustaveli Avenue tells a compelling story of resilience and the people's capacity to shape their nation's destiny.**

Georgia's history with protests on Rustaveli Avenue tells a compelling story of resilience and the people's capacity to shape their nation's destiny. Time and again, Georgians have gathered in front of the Parliament building, often starting from a place of vulnerability and ending as victors. While temporary setbacks have occurred, Rustaveli Avenue remains a symbol of collective defiance and hope, as its significance has repeatedly intersected with Georgia's critical historical moments.

In 1989, Georgians faced the Soviet military's brutal crackdown, with Russian soldiers wielding shovels and using poison gas to disperse peaceful protesters. Yet, just two years later, the country declared independence, and [April 9](#) became a symbol of the Georgian spirit and a reminder of "never again" spilling the blood of peaceful demonstrators. Protests in 2001-2003, in 2001-2003 brought a victory again, as the public's outrage against the government's interference with Rustavi 2 forced the [resignation](#) of the Interior Minister, paving the way for the transformative Rose Revolution of 2003.

From 2006 to 2011, Rustaveli became a stage for both triumph and tragedy. Protests following the murder of Sandro Girgvliani highlighted systemic abuses but ended with violent [dispersals](#) in 2007. The backlash forced Mikheil Saakashvili to resign and call elections, which he narrowly won. Subsequent demonstrations, such as the failed "city of tents" in 2009 and the May 26, 2011 rally, saw protesters violently [removed](#)—a move that later led to charges against Saakashvili and his ministers. These protests ultimately laid the groundwork

for Ivanishvili's political debut and the rise of the Georgian Dream in 2012.

Post-2012, Rustaveli Avenue became quieter until sporadic protests reignited public fervor. Demonstrations in [2018](#) against nightclub raids and in [2019](#) over Russian Communist Party MP Sergey Gavrilov's appearance in Parliament resulted in tangible victories, such as electoral reforms and high-profile resignations. However, the use of rubber bullets and police violence during the 2019 protests underscored the escalating use of force by Georgian Dream.

The pro-European [demonstrations](#) of 2022-2023, fueled by the government's reluctance to support Ukraine and failure to secure EU candidate status, marked a shift. Massive rallies, especially in 2023, pressured the government to [withdraw](#) the controversial "foreign agents" bill. Still, Georgian Dream's authoritarian tendencies persisted, culminating in the [reintroduction](#) of the Law in Spring 2024, the rigged elections of October 2024, and the current decision to abandon EU integration.

Whether currently ongoing protests will follow the path of past triumphs or become a rare exception remains uncertain. Georgia's history suggests that Rustaveli Avenue often catalyzes change, but with the Georgian Dream's increased use of force, the outcome is anything but assured.

**The current protest is fundamentally different from previous demonstrations on Rustaveli Avenue. First and foremost, it is not orchestrated by the opposition, as evidenced by the absence of stages, microphones, or political speeches—hallmarks of earlier movements.**

The current protest is fundamentally different

from previous demonstrations on Rustaveli Avenue. First and foremost, it is not orchestrated by the opposition, as evidenced by the absence of stages, microphones, or political speeches—hallmarks of earlier movements. Instead, it is a grassroots, citizen-driven protest marked by raw anger and determination not to give up Georgia's European future. Protesters are willing to confront the police directly, yet they maintain a strict commitment to nonviolence. Second, this is a protest of the youth—students, schoolchildren, and young professionals have taken center stage, bringing fresh energy and resolve. Third, the level of preparedness and self-organization is unprecedented. Protesters equip themselves with gas masks, raise funds collectively, and use creative tools like fireworks, which have become a symbolic form of resistance. By shooting fireworks at police, they create discomfort without causing substantial harm. Remarkably, there are no Molotov cocktails, vandalism, or car burnings—practices often seen in European protests.

## Why Now and Why At All?

Many wonder why Bidzina Ivanishvili decided to reject the EU path openly. Why make such an explicit declaration when simply “failing” to meet EU criteria would have led to the same result?

The first part of the answer lies in the timing. Ivanishvili likely made this move because the protests against the fraudulent elections had lost momentum. As public energy waned, he executed what he had hinted at in April: waiting for dissent to fade before making a bold, divisive decision. The European Parliament's stern [resolution](#) provided a convenient pretext, as the announcement came just hours after its adoption. Thus, the timing appears calculated to capitalize on the temporary lull in resistance.

The second and more significant question is: why Ivanishvili chose to reject the EU so overtly at all?

No plausible explanation exists without considering Moscow's role. This move aligns with Russia's interest in firmly cementing Georgia within its sphere of influence. With Trump reentering the White House in January and a potential settlement of the Ukraine conflict on the horizon, Ivanishvili and the Kremlin may want to eliminate any ambiguity about Georgia's geopolitical alignment. By preemptively removing Georgia from the EU accession track, they ensure that the country is off the table in any future negotiations involving Russia.

***Ivanishvili frees himself from external scrutiny, giving him carte blanche to suppress political opponents and tighten his grip on power without fear of international consequences.***

Domestically, abandoning the EU track also serves Ivanishvili's desire for unchecked authority. EU conditionality has long acted as a constraint on authoritarian impulses, with economic, financial, and security support from the West tied to democratic reforms. By removing this leverage, Ivanishvili frees himself from external scrutiny, giving him *carte blanche* to suppress political opponents and tighten his grip on power without fear of international consequences.

Another factor may be Ivanishvili's personal paranoia and impulsiveness. The decision appears to have been imposed suddenly, as neither GD leaders nor formal government program hinted at such a shift before or immediately after the elections. The Speaker of Parliament's anti-EU rhetoric on public television the night before the announcement was the first significant signal. This suggests that the decision could have been made unilaterally by Ivanishvili and imposed on his team, which is composed of loyalists and dependent figures unlikely to challenge him. His systematic purging of dissenters within the Georgian Dream has left

him surrounded by a compliant cadre of “yes-men” incapable of resisting even the most radical decisions.

## Breaking the Will

The November–December protests have revealed the Georgian Dream’s determination to crush dissent through unprecedented violence and injustice. In just the first ten days, almost 500 [protesters](#) have been detained, with more than 80% reportedly subjected to inhumane treatment. Up to a dozen protesters face criminal charges. Information recently [circulated](#) that the law enforcers have a list of 50 persons, which must be neutralized, involving youth activists, social media activists, and journalists.

Peaceful demonstrators have faced tear gas, water cannons, and violent beatings, often before rallies could even gather momentum. The involvement of masked and unidentified men in black, operating alongside riot police, has [escalated](#) the brutality. These individuals, without insignias or accountability, have used excessive force against protesters, creating an atmosphere of fear and impunity.

***The strategy of the Georgian Dream appears to be a brutal suppression of the journalists and “decapitating” the protests through arresting political opponents.***

The strategy of the Georgian Dream appears to be a brutal suppression of the journalists and “decapitating” the protests through arresting political opponents. Journalists of Formula TV, TV Pirveli and Mtavari have been [assaulted](#) by the police force while being live. Party offices of Ahali and UNM have been [raided](#). Ahali’s leader, Nika Gvaramia, was detained and [sentenced](#) to 12 days in prison. Strong Georgia’s Aleko Elisashvili was put in a two-month pre-trial detention, facing a charge of

3 years. Other political leaders have been detained administratively and severely beaten on camera. It appears that the riot police and GD-affiliated “titushki” are seeking out recognizable prominent protesters to physically assault them.

Detainees have [reported](#) severe abuse, including beatings in police vans and detention centers, with injuries ranging from facial trauma to broken ribs. Some, like Formula’s TV Anchor Guram Rogava, miraculously survived death (in his case, by broken neck). Many have endured verbal abuse and humiliation, such as being forced to praise the riot police chief or sign falsified statements under duress.

The youth have emerged as a defining force in these protests, displaying remarkable creativity and resolve. Equipped with gas masks and innovative tactics like tracking police movements and neutralizing tear gas canisters, they have shown resilience despite facing particularly harsh treatment. Reports detail how detained young protesters were mocked, doused with water in freezing conditions, and brutally beaten. Many were subjected to “corridors” of officers who inflicted relentless physical abuse, leaving victims with severe physical and psychological scars.

Remarkably, despite these crackdowns, the protests have proliferated across the country. Demonstrations have been reported in at least 40 regions, transforming this movement into a truly nationwide resistance. What began as localized outrage in Tbilisi has become a popular uprising, hitting the streets of Batumi, Telavi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Khashuri, and other regional centers.

## Two Pillars of Power

The Georgian Dream government has increasingly relied on brute force as a primary tool to suppress dissent and maintain control over the protests. Riot police and special units have deployed exces-

sive force to disperse demonstrators. Unidentified groups of masked men, often referred to as “titushki”, operate alongside law enforcement, escalating the violence with impunity.

**The targeting of peaceful protesters, journalists, and even bystanders demonstrates an indiscriminate approach aimed at creating a climate of fear.**

This reliance on force serves a dual purpose: to intimidate the broader public into silence and to project an image of absolute control. The targeting of peaceful protesters, journalists, and even bystanders demonstrates an indiscriminate approach aimed at creating a climate of fear. The absence of accountability—evidenced by the lack of charges or disciplinary action against perpetrators—emboldens law enforcement to continue these practices. In many cases, Police have stood nearby, not intervening, as peaceful demonstrators were brutally beaten up. This brute force is not limited to street-level violence but extends to legal and administrative measures, such as arbitrary detentions, fabricated charges, and the weaponization of laws to constrain civil society and media freedom.

Propaganda has emerged as the second pillar of Georgian Dream’s power, effectively complementing its use of brute force. A network of pro-government media outlets, including Imedi TV, PosTV, Rustavi 2, and the Georgian Public Broadcaster, has played a critical role in shaping public perception of the protests and opposition movements. These outlets present a heavily skewed narrative, portraying protesters as violent provocateurs, foreign agents, or destabilizing forces acting against Georgia’s national interests. Such coverage often aligns with GD’s broader rhetoric, which frames dissent as a threat to stability and an attempt of *coup d’etat* instigated by the West.

## Cracks within the System

The GD’s final push towards authoritarianism and the use of violence is not without an internal push-back, however. A growing wave of dissent within Georgia’s civil service and diplomatic corps has emerged following the decision to halt EU accession negotiations and the subsequent violence on the demonstrators. Over 400 civil servants from key governmental institutions, including the Ministry of Finance, the Ministries of Justice, Education and Defense, and the National Bank, issued a statement [condemning](#) this decision. They emphasized their dedication to Georgia’s European aspirations and criticized the government’s use of force against peaceful protesters. Universities have [suspended](#) lectures and joined the protests, with even the Ivanishvili-owned Kutaisi International University students [protesting](#).

Similarly, over 240 diplomats from the Foreign Ministry issued a joint statement highlighting the geopolitical risks of abandoning the EU accession process. They warned that this decision contradicts Georgia’s strategic interests and constitutional obligations under Article 78, which enshrines the country’s European aspirations. Georgian [Ambassadors](#) to Bulgaria, Czechia, Netherlands, and Italy resigned, and few others made public statements condemning the reversal of the European course.

More importantly, the dissent seems to be brewing in the law-enforcement agencies as well. Only one high-profile [resignation](#) (head of the operative planning unit of the special tasks department) has occurred so far, but reports have suggested that the riot police and law-enforcement officers are not enjoying the role of *punishers*.

Remarkably, no cracks have yet occurred within the Georgian Dream party or political system. Even though rumors emerged that the former Prime Minister and nominally the current party

leader, Irakli Gharibashvili, was planning to leave the party and the country, he [issued](#) a statement rebuking such a possibility.

## The Role and Limitations of Sanctions

Sanctions against the Georgian Dream government, its leadership, and individuals responsible for political violence can play a crucial but only a partial role in addressing Georgia's deepening authoritarianism. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have already demonstrated this by [imposing](#) unilateral sanctions on key figures linked to GD and its patron, Bidzina Ivanishvili. These actions set a precedent that other EU member states could follow, using bilateral mechanisms to target those directly involved in state capture and human rights abuses.

The EU and the US could take these measures further by adopting a *Magnitsky*-style sanctions regime, freezing assets, and banning travel for Ivanishvili, his inner circle, and those implicated in the violence against protesters. Additionally, the EU could consider partially suspending Georgia's visa-free travel agreement, a move that would signal strong disapproval of the regime while directly impacting public sentiment. However, these sanctions must be carefully calibrated to avoid harming ordinary Georgians, whose European aspirations remain intact despite GD's betrayal of their interests.

Sanctions alone are unlikely to make the GD government reverse its authoritarian trajectory or return to a pro-European course. Their primary purpose should be to exacerbate internal fractures within the GD system and increase public dissatisfaction with the ruling party. Targeted measures could deepen divisions between Ivanishvili's allies and the broader GD apparatus, as individuals facing sanctions may begin questioning their loyalty. The growing unpopularity of the regime, fueled by

its increasing isolation and economic stagnation, could ultimately weaken its grip on power.

The international community must also take complementary steps beyond sanctions. The EU and the U.S. should refuse to recognize the legitimacy of GD's government, call for new elections, and amplify support for Georgia's civil society, independent media, and opposition parties. In an environment where opposition parties are starved of resources—especially as their boycott of Parliament cuts off state funding amounting to 20 million GEL—external assistance becomes essential. Traditional hesitations about directly supporting political parties due to Georgian laws must be set aside in light of the existential threat posed by GD's authoritarian consolidation. Without such aid, opposition forces risk irrelevance and collapse.

***Sanctions and international support should promote democratic resilience, empower citizens and opposition groups, and undermine GD's monopoly on power.***

Ultimately, sanctions and international support should promote democratic resilience, empower citizens and opposition groups, and undermine GD's monopoly on power. While these measures may not force immediate changes in policy, they can create cracks in the regime, foster dissent within its ranks, and embolden the population to demand democratic reforms and a return to the European path.

## Mortal Combat for Georgia's Future

The confrontation unfolding in Georgia is nothing short of a zero-sum battle for the country's future. The stakes are clear: either Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream solidify their grip on power,



dismantling all vestiges of democracy, or the resistance forces successfully force new elections and reclaim the nation's European trajectory. There is no middle ground, no room for compromise. In this mortal contest, there will be a definitive loser—either Ivanishvili or the Georgian people.

If Georgian Dream prevails, the country will plunge into full authoritarianism. Civil society, independent media, and opposition parties will be systematically crushed. Activists, journalists, and political leaders will face relentless persecution—detained, exiled, or silenced through coercion and violence. With no organized resistance left, Ivanishvili will preside over a nation devoid of its democratic institutions, where fear replaces freedom, and the European dream is relegated to history. Such a victory for GD would not just betray the will of the Georgian people; it would also be a dramatic setback for democratic West.

***If Georgian Dream prevails, the country will plunge into full authoritarianism. Civil society, independent media, and opposition parties will be systematically crushed. Activists, journalists, and political leaders will face relentless persecution—detained, exiled, or silenced through coercion and violence.***

On the other hand, should the resistance succeed, Ivanishvili will be forced to concede to new elections. This outcome would represent a critical turning point for Georgia, as it seeks to break free from the stranglehold of one-man rule. New

elections, if held under fair and transparent conditions, would offer a chance to restore democratic institutions, reinvigorate civil society, and reaffirm Georgia's European aspirations. Yet even this path will come with significant challenges, as the damage inflicted by GD's rule will require years of concerted effort to repair.

The fight is existential for both sides. For Ivanishvili, a loss would mean the collapse of his power structure and exposure to accountability, both at home and abroad. For the Georgian people, a failure to resist would mean the death of their democracy and the erasure of their voices in shaping the nation's destiny. The outcome of this confrontation will define not only Georgia's immediate future but its place in the world for generations to come.

***In this mortal combat, neutrality is not an option. The international community, as well as Georgia's allies in Europe and the United States, must recognize the urgency of this moment.***

In this mortal combat, neutrality is not an option. The international community, as well as Georgia's allies in Europe and the United States, must recognize the urgency of this moment. Supporting the forces of resistance—civil society, media, and opposition parties—is essential. The stakes are nothing less than the survival of Georgian democracy. If the Georgian people lose, they lose everything. But if Ivanishvili loses, Georgia may yet reclaim its rightful path toward a free and democratic future ■

# The EU Must Support Georgia's Resistance

**A**s nationwide protests continue in Georgia, marking one of the largest resistance movements against the Georgian Dream's rule since it came to power in 2012, the European Union faces a crucial opportunity to counter Russia's influence in the region. Vladimir Putin's efforts to expand Russia's influence in Europe are multifaceted. In Ukraine, it employs military force to assert its control. In Moldova, it seeks to install a pro-Russian government by undermining the current political establishment. Meanwhile, in Georgia, it aims to maintain an authoritarian regime in power despite strong opposition from the population.

***There is a need for a clear and unified message from the EU as a foreign policy actor.***

Since the protests erupted following the rigged 26 October elections, only the [European Parliament](#) and the three [Baltic states](#) have taken a bold

stance, issuing strong statements condemning electoral fraud, supporting the democratic resistance and Georgia's European aspirations, and calling for new elections. While other EU member states and institutions made statements decrying various democratic backsliding episodes, there is a need for a clear and unified message from the EU as a foreign policy actor.

With each passing day, violence intensifies in Georgia, and police responses grow increasingly brutal, suggesting the government is heading toward escalation. The brutal crackdown on the demonstrators has been followed up by the [arrest](#) of the opposition and youth leaders and the assault of the opposition party offices. This is further fueled by strong pro-Russian and anti-EU propaganda spearheaded by government-affiliated TV channels.

These developments coincide with the start of Kaja Kallas's tenure as the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Her first visit



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to Kyiv highlighted Ukraine and developments in the East as top priorities, which could also benefit Georgia. While in Kyiv, Kallas and EU Council President António Costa called Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili to express their support and issued a [statement](#) backing a democratic Georgia and signaling the potential for a “stronger response” against the authorities in the event of further escalation. With a capable new leadership team, the EU has an ideal opportunity to reinforce its credibility in the eastern neighborhood, ensuring unity at a pivotal moment for Ukraine while recognizing the significance of developments in Georgia, which carry profound implications for regional security and EU interests.

This may necessitate a renewed EU assessment of Vladimir Putin’s objectives in the region and the diverse methods Russia employs to achieve them. These range from military invasions to hybrid tactics for regime change—leveraging oligarchs cultivated in Russia who serve its interests—to counter Western influence and prevent regional nations from integrating into Western security and political structures.

***Georgia exemplifies how Russia has effectively decoupled a country from the West within a decade, primarily through the influence of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili.***

Georgia exemplifies how Russia has effectively decoupled a country from the West within a decade, primarily through the influence of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. By sustaining a balancing act and fostering ambiguity, the Georgian Dream government has managed to project an image of alignment with the West and Euro-Atlantic integration while simultaneously steering the country in the opposite direction. Examples of these actions include adopting Kremlin narratives, such as claiming that “West is dragging Georgia into a war with

Russia,” [inviting](#) a Russian legislator to address the Georgian Parliament in 2019 (which sparked protests), suppressing civil society and media, and violating human rights. These violations, including attacks on the LGBTIQ community, culminated in the adoption of Russia-style legislation in spring 2024—ironically after Georgia was granted EU candidate status.

Until 2022, the Georgian Dream-led government successfully maintained a strategic ambiguity, both with the West and within parts of the Georgian administration and society. This approach allowed it to consolidate power and capture state institutions. Thus, liberating a state captured by a Russia-backed oligarch through free and democratic elections became nearly impossible—a reality starkly demonstrated during the 26 October elections. Despite strong popular resistance, because of the institution-embedded [vote-buying](#), massive violence, and intimidation, disinformation propaganda, control of the election commissions, and fraudulent tactics, such as carousels, the Georgian Dream scored over 53% of the votes – a result which was disputed by the exit polls and also assessed as dubious by international and local observers.

To address this institutional and state capture by a Moscow-friendly oligarch and his party, the EU must upgrade its strategy, starting by clearly defining its interests in Georgia and the region.

From a geo-economics perspective, the EU should not undermine the significant attractiveness that Georgia has gained in recent years through its strategic position between Asia and Europe along the Black Sea coast to establishing itself as a key transit hub within the [Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor](#), better known as the Middle Corridor. This route has gained increased importance following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine which disrupted trade through the Northern Route. This corridor is widely seen as the most viable link between

European and Central Asian markets and China. The EU has already [committed](#) EUR 10 billion to infrastructure investments to establish direct transport links with Central Asia through the Black Sea and Caucasus regions, enhancing its geo-economic presence and leveraging influence in the South Caucasus (including Georgia) and Central Asia against competing approaches from Russia and China. However, amidst a shifting geopolitical balance of power and the uncertain outcome of the war in Ukraine, the EU must stay focused and safeguard its transport routes from being attacked or exploited by external actors, including for potential [sanction](#) circumvention. Moreover, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and Association Agreement, strategic pillars of economic and political cooperation between the EU and Georgia, are now hanging by a thread, risking further reducing the EU's leverage over Georgia and its government. Hence, the EU should remain interested in Georgia from an economic point of view.

***Allowing Georgia to drift further toward autocracy will diminish opportunities for meaningful engagement and undermine the EU's leverage to drive positive change.***

Politically, it is in the EU's interest to see Georgia join the bloc as the only long-term guarantee for its security, stability, and transformation into a fully democratic country. The EU should capitalize on Georgia's potential, as it remains the most pro-European nation in the region, with an impressive [81%](#) of its population favoring EU membership. Supporting Georgia's democratic values and those defending them is crucial. Allowing Georgia to drift further toward autocracy will diminish opportunities for meaningful engagement and undermine the EU's leverage to drive positive change. Additionally, the EU's role in safeguarding stability and contributing to conflict resolution

in Georgia could be weakened with potential repercussions for the mandates of the EUSR and the EUMM mission in the occupied territories. The EU must, therefore, continue supporting those forces in Georgia that stand against the authoritarian Georgian Dream government, whether media, civil society, or political groups, as well as academic institutions. Such support will undoubtedly be opposed by the Georgian Dream leadership, which has accused Brussels and European capitals of interfering in Georgia's domestic affairs. However, this propagandistic pushback must be disregarded and actively challenged.

In light of the above and considering the current situation on the ground, the EU must enhance its strategic posture in the region and adopt a more assertive approach to shaping Georgia's future at this critical moment. Given recent developments revealing the true intentions of the Georgian Dream, which contradict the will of the Georgian people, the EU should eliminate any ambiguity regarding the election results and openly call for new elections.

This would be the first step toward de-escalating the situation. Such a call should come in the form of strong, high-level statements and through existing diplomatic channels to pressure the government to de-escalate. Any discussion of an additional inquiry into the conduct of the October elections is, at this stage, futile and counterproductive, as it would reduce pressure on the Georgian Dream. A clearly articulated demand in line with the position of the European Parliament will make the EU's position more powerful and credible.

The EU should urgently condemn all acts of violence against protesters and political opponents and impose sanctions on those responsible, including the Minister of Interior, the Chief of the State Security Service, the leadership of the law-enforcement divisions, and riot police who

terrorize the protesters. Given the urgency due to the situation on the ground, member states should quickly coordinate and join the Baltic countries in imposing national sanctions on individuals responsible for repression and human rights violations, including politicians, government members, and MPs.

***The EU should urgently condemn all acts of violence against protesters and political opponents and impose sanctions on those responsible, including the Minister of Interior, the Chief of the State Security Service, the leadership of the law-enforcement divisions, and riot police who terrorize the protesters.***

Without strong deterrence from the West, the Georgian Dream government will likely escalate its repression, potentially leading to even more dramatic scenarios. This is an opportunity for the EU and its member states to demonstrate leadership and reaffirm their commitment to defending human rights and democracy. Support for Georgia's democracy can have very concrete pillars – supporting civil society organizations, free media, and academia. With the consolidation of authoritarianism, these institutions will become the next battleground between democracy and oppression. By taking decisive action in Georgia, the EU can strengthen its credibility as a trusted partner for aspiring EU nations in the region and counter any perceptions of weakness ■

# 41 vs. 47

**U**ntil 20 January 2025, Donald Trump is considered an “incoming president.” It might be more accurate to call him a “returning president.” Interestingly, the word “incoming” is used not only in politics. In military jargon, it refers to a warning that enemy artillery fire or RPGs are approaching, requiring extraordinary measures to withstand the impact. The results of such an impact will undoubtedly alter the surroundings, may cause casualties, and will influence the future actions of the “impacted.”

The anticipatory mood inside and outside the US increasingly resembles the military meaning of the word. Trump’s declared and previously demonstrated determination to revise and reshape domestic and international affairs fundamentally is expected to create not just waves of change but a sweeping tsunami.

A brief glance at the president-elect’s known preferences for senior governmental positions indicates the seriousness of these changes. The most

common adjectives for the new nominees are “outsiders,” “disrupters,” and “loyalists.” This reflects the serious intent and preparation for engaging in fundamental change.

***The 47<sup>th</sup> version of President Trump is far more powerful than the 45<sup>th</sup>.***

Is Trump capable of doing it? To paraphrase the slogan of one of his predecessors—yes, he can! The 47<sup>th</sup> version of President Trump is far more powerful than the 45<sup>th</sup>. Trump and the Republican Party, led by him, control the White House, the Senate, and (highly likely) the House of Representatives while dominating the Supreme Court. Most importantly, most Americans embrace his ideas and plans. Unlike during his first term, many elected and appointed Republican representatives owe their current positions to Donald Trump. All this makes him a superman with superpowers, at least for the next two years until the mid-term congressional elections. Whatever domestic changes Trump’s presidency entails will undoubtedly affect the international system.



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Many pundits attempt to decipher and interpret Trump's main slogan, MAGA (Make America Great Again). Meanwhile, for President Trump, it is clear that this means restoring America's economic, political, and military might and using that power to advance American interests globally.

The contours of his foreign policy agenda are encapsulated in a short, Reaganesque phrase: 'peace through strength,' leaving ample room for interpretation. Trump's tumultuous rhetoric and actions left temporary wounds on the fabric of America's democracy, much like the ear wound he sustained during a rally in Pennsylvania. Yet, following his assertive victory, the United States—wounded but still resilient—will seek to reassert its might both at home and abroad. To understand what Trump's new foreign policy might entail, we must look back to his first presidential term and the methods he employed to achieve his goals. While Trump never received a Nobel Peace Prize, he fashioned himself as a peacemaker with several notable achievements: the Abraham Accords between Israel and key Arab states, direct and high-level dialogue with North Korea, and a peace deal with the Taliban.

He never shied away from using American strength—pulling out of the Iran Deal and imposing new sanctions, killing its celebrated military leader Qasem Soleimani, eliminating Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, effectively ending its status as a significant military and political force; killing hundreds of Russian “Wagner” operatives in Syria; supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine, unlike his predecessor; and increasing tariffs on Chinese products, sparking an economic war with China.

International institutions and treaties also faced scrutiny, from renegotiating NAFTA to pressuring NATO member countries to increase their contributions and withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council, the World Health Organization, and the Paris Climate Accord.

Even though democracy promotion was not prominent in his foreign policy agenda, Trump decisively supported Venezuela's opposition and rolled back ties with the Cuban regime.

From all of this, it is likely that an emboldened Trump will vigorously pursue his foreign policy agenda, matching “talks” with “walks” and reshaping the global political, economic, and security landscape.

## Implications for Georgia

What does this mean for contemporary Georgia and where will it fit into Trump's vision of a “New World Order?”

***Unfortunately, current Georgia appears to orbit around that anti-American and generally anti-Western axis.***

Trump will inherit two major conflicts—Ukraine and the Middle East—highlighting the weaknesses and inefficacy of the current world order and its institutions. This legacy clearly defines roles: the Russia-China-Iran-North Korea axis challenges American interests. Unfortunately, current Georgia appears to orbit around that anti-American and generally anti-Western axis.

This alignment is manifested not only in fraudulent elections which place Georgia among a long list of authoritarian and poorly governed countries worldwide. Unlike these other nations, however, Georgia claims to be “Western” and aspires to integrate into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. Yet for the past 200 years and even today, the imperial power that has threatened Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity is Russia. It seems Georgia is suffering from severe amnesia or some form of the “Stockholm Syndrome.”

The shift towards this specific axis is evident in

concrete actions, not just rhetoric. For small or medium-sized countries, these actions often align with the policies and priorities of major players in the axis, encompassing all functions of the state—economy, security, ideology, etc.

**According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, even preliminary indicators for the first quarter of 2024 show that Georgia's primary trading partner is neither the EU nor the US for exports or imports.**

According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, even preliminary indicators for the first quarter of 2024 [show](#) that Georgia's primary trading partner is neither the EU nor the US for exports or imports. Russia is increasingly becoming a significant destination for both—openly or covertly. The top trading partner by export is Kyrgyzstan, a country in Central Asia, widely considered one of the poorest in Eurasia! It is no secret that Kyrgyzstan is often used to smuggle goods into Russia, exploiting loopholes to evade sanctions. Next in line are Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Armenia, Türkiye, and China! So much for preferential trade agreements with the EU and special trade regimes with the US. It is unsurprising, considering the current Georgian government's open refusal to join Western nations in proactively supporting Ukraine and imposing sanctions against Russia.

Cooperation in the security sphere between Georgia and Western countries or institutions (like NATO) has been put on hold, delayed indefinitely, or canceled. The Georgian leadership continues to promote a narrative about a mythical Global (read – Western) War Party, trying to “drag Georgia into the Russo-Ukrainian war.” The military is eroded and unrecognizable, with members of special forces who participated in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war dying under suspicious circumstances, likely due to leaked security personnel databases. More

than that, the Voice of America recently reported that Russia compromises the entire electronic communication of the Georgian foreign service. The country's security apparatus, from the police to state security services, primarily targets political opposition, their supporters, and independent non-governmental institutions.

Georgian legislation increasingly mirrors “new trends” among authoritarian countries, labeling pro-Western NGOs and activists as “foreign agents.” A law widely known as the “Russian law”—oppressive legislation introduced and actively implemented by Russia—was forcefully imposed on the Georgian population despite widespread protests and numerous warnings, pledges, and objections from Georgia's Western allies and friends. The hard-earned EU candidacy status is on hold; the US has openly announced a comprehensive review of cooperation with Georgia and, like the EU, has suspended assistance to the Georgian government. It should be noted that this stance from the US is not simply the policy of one particular administration but a bipartisan consensus shared by members of Congress and prominent think tanks.

Specific actions complement anti-Western policies. Georgia has moved closer to countries from the aforementioned axis, introducing a visa-free regime for China. Georgian senior officials have frequently visited Iran, expanding areas of cooperation. Friendly and complimentary statements from Russia towards the current Georgian regime have become a “new normal.”

## **Georgian Dream of Business as Usual**

Given this situation, what are the chances of normalizing relations between the new American leadership and the current Georgian government? The primary question is whether or not the administration of the 47<sup>th</sup> president of the US will

even care about Party #41's administrative capacities in Georgia.

Optimists may claim that the Georgian Dream and its leadership have a sort of “direct access” to President Trump through Viktor Orbán of Hungary whom the new American president has praised as a “strong man” and “tough guy.” Beyond personal relationships, Orbán's conservative agenda resonates with the forces in America that are now in power. While the Hungarian leader might be a messenger of Trump, several factors must be considered. Orbán's ambitions are far greater than merely fixing US-Georgian relations. He likely sees himself as a conduit between Trump and Putin, not Trump and Ivanishvili. The reward for facilitating an end to the bloodshed in Ukraine is much greater than whitewashing one obscure billionaire.

Let us imagine that, against the odds, Orbán does find the time to discuss Georgia with Trump. What would his message be? In the most optimistic scenario (for the Georgian Dream), he might present them as a “conservative force” or label Ivanishvili as “just like you—a businessman who entered politics to save his country.” The problem with such a scenario is obvious—it might resonate (with a huge stretch of the imagination) for major players but not for a marginal figure ostracized by the West. At the end of the day, Orbán himself is not playing an “anti-Western” game, just a “conservative” one, and Hungary is already firmly embedded in the European and Euro-Atlantic orbit. Orbán may deviate temporarily from the mainstream, but he sees himself as a Western politician at his core. In the case of Ivanishvili (who avoids official positions and prefers to “lead from behind”) or his party, calling them “conservative” is an overreach—a label that has been [debunked](#) by many, including my colleagues in previous volumes of this journal.

Whatever message Orbán may deliver (or not) to Trump, the relationship will ultimately be managed

by the State Department, influenced by the foreign affairs committees of the House and Senate, and must resonate positively among the US foreign policy community. Given current statements and bipartisan initiatives, it is hard to imagine a dramatic shift in attitude toward the Georgian Dream and its leadership. The trust has not just been broken—it is shattered. Ivanishvili's leadership is widely recognized as untrustworthy, a reputation he consistently reinforces with the American establishment.

***The trust has not just been broken—it is shattered. Ivanishvili's leadership is widely recognized as untrustworthy, a reputation he consistently reinforces with the American establishment.***

The same sentiments are widely shared in Europe. Given Trump's belief that the EU should bear primary responsibility for its neighborhood, the Georgian case will likely be seen as a “primarily European headache.” Without proper consultation with European leaders (beyond just Orbán), nothing will happen. In that scenario, the prospects for normalization with Ivanishvili and his team look even bleaker. Georgia's ruling elite has repeatedly violated numerous EU-brokered agreements. Such a Euro-Atlantic consensus will not be overturned overnight, especially if it requires trusting someone widely seen as a “certified cheater.” A planned EU-inspired commission to investigate electoral violations is pending and the current US president has publicly called for an investigation into electoral fraud—an extremely rare occurrence. It is unlikely that the US will take any active steps towards legitimizing the “victory” of the Georgian Dream or engage in meaningful dialogue.

Ironically, Georgia's case is one of the few in which pundits, politicians, journalists, businessmen, and foreign policy experts agree broadly. The current

leadership is driving a pro-Western population away from the West and into the influence of Russia and China. This shared attitude results from a series of disappointments over more than a decade of the Georgian Dream's rule.

***The only remedy for such an outcome might not be a change in the government's attitude but a change in the government itself. An "awakened" America definitely cannot tolerate any more "Dreamers."***

Finally, what will happen if, for the next six months, due to the formation of a new cabinet,

staffing, and congressional approvals, we see no visible US policy toward Georgia (which, in my opinion, is the most likely scenario)? Much will depend on the situation on the ground, the opposition's resilience, the special commission's findings on electoral fraud, and the ruling party's ability to govern without proper legitimacy. It is a very slippery slope that could firmly place Georgia into the wrong axis and among the category of what the 45<sup>th</sup> US president once referred to as "s\*\*\*hole countries." The only remedy for such an outcome might not be a change in the government's attitude but a change in the government itself. An "awakened" America definitely cannot tolerate any more "Dreamers" ■

# Rear (Overton) Window

If you have been a Georgian liberal observing the 26 October 2024 election, you may be excused for sympathizing with a character from Hitchcock's classic thriller, "The Rear Window": much like James Stewart's affable but increasingly paranoid persona, you may feel bedridden, left to contemplate the developments passively, peering over the neighborhood, wondering if the bad-tempered husband (the oligarch) has killed his little-loved wife (democracy) and buried it in the backyard, or have you just imagined it.

Just as the protests unfold and the results are challenged, Georgian democracy is simultaneously more vibrant than ever, with the promise of new branches burgeoning on its almost dissected and moribund trunk, and also has its institutions gangrened by the oligarchic state capture.

So what do we see, peering through that rear window from the hotel of missed opportunities? And how do we know if what we see is a fact or a mere figment of our inflamed imagination?

## Forging the Cultural Hegemony

"The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters" - in times of upheaval, it is always helpful to take up the words of Antonio Gramsci. Apart from presaging the "time of the monsters" coming during the inter-regnum of political formations, it was also he who formulated some key concepts that intuitively respond to such times while remaining sufficiently flexible for adapting to politics in a state of flux.

One such concept is "cultural hegemony" - the idea that a worldview captures and dominates the imagination of a particular country or a concrete social class at a particular time, only to be dethroned by the other. Such ideas are articulated by the intellectuals and they frame and shape the debate. Through cultural hegemony, says Gramsci, the elites control us, and to regain lost control, the aspiring classes must re-capture this cultural hegemony - or the narrative, in modern parlance - too.



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It is impossible to deny that the narrative linking the liberal and pro-European path to progress has been dominant in Georgia since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when the young aristocratic elite emancipated itself from the vassal mentality of their fathers and dared to imagine Georgia as a nation free from Russia's internal oppression and external imperial hegemony.

This was quite common for the national liberation movements of Central and Eastern Europe at the time, which resulted in the emancipation of the “captive nations” from the multi-ethnic empires—Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian—at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Georgia, too, saw its first modern republic emerge in 1918, only to be promptly submerged by the rising Soviet empire in 1921. Yet, almost paradoxically, the hegemonic idea carried onwards, refracted through the prism of Soviet propaganda and adulterated with ideology to the extent of sometimes becoming unrecognizable.

Moreover, the ideas of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century authors and fathers of the modern Georgian nation, like Ilia Chavchavadze, gradually became frozen into a dogma - a trend that continued in post-Soviet times, when Chavchavadze was sanctified by the Georgian Orthodox Church as St. Ilia the Truthful. This appropriation became possible because the 19th-century movement was both trying to establish and secure national identity (through references to shared history, language, and demands for the re-emancipation of the Georgian Church from the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate) and instilling the ideas of solidarity, individual rights, and modern (European) education. In this sense, it was both conservative and progressive.

The progressive strand found its political expression in the Social Democratic Party that dominated the Georgian Democratic Republic in 1918-1921. Somewhat paradoxically, the conservative, identitarian, and anti-imperialist narrative was recuperated by the Communist rulers, then by parts of the national movement in the 1990s and the Georgian

Orthodox Church.

And, thus, while the cultural hegemony of the revered authors held on the surface, their political message got diluted, adulterated, and split into multiple, often ideologically disparate threads. Ilia Chavchavadze and St. Ilia the Truthful are the same person, but whether an official or politician is hanging his portrait or his religious icon in the office carries an entirely different message.

Apart from a brief period of Zviad Gamsakhurdia's rule, when he proposed a pan-Caucasian solidarity agenda, a consensus where the integration with the West was considered synonymous with Georgia's independence held. This narrative remained politically dominant, famously expressing itself in the phrase pronounced by Zurab Zhvania in Strasbourg as the country joined the Council of Europe – "I am Georgian, therefore, I am European."

For most of the 1990s, Europe's "end of history" moment meant that an eventual integration into Europe became synonymous with the interlinked elements of free market and democratic governance. The European Union's Copenhagen Criteria essentially reiterate that a liberal system of government and the market economy is synonymous with becoming the European state and, thus, pre-conditions to anyone joining that select club. For decades, Georgia struggled but tried to demonstrate it was worthy of its intimately held (but not widely recognized) European identity. Fulfilling the culturally hegemonic domestic narrative self-evidently implied and included the adoption of these elements of the European hegemonic narrative.

***For the first time, the ruling party, and not some fringe group, has argued that the model of liberal democracy was not acceptable for Georgia and that European integration under the Copenhagen criteria was not desirable either.***

With the Georgian Dream's pre-election campaign in 2024, that hegemonic narrative was put in the meat grinder. For the first time, the ruling party, and not some fringe group, has argued that the model of liberal democracy was not acceptable for Georgia and that European integration under the Copenhagen criteria was not desirable either. What happened? How did the unthinkable idea "suddenly" lay claim to being the mainstream?

***Through political discourse, media control, and information manipulation, an idea that was considered unthinkable may become acceptable and even sensible.***

In a concept that indirectly echoes the Gramscian concepts, Joseph P. Overton, a policy analyst, proposed that an idea's political viability depends mainly on whether it falls within this window of acceptability. The "[Overton window](#)" frames the range of policies a politician can recommend without appearing too extreme to gain or keep public office. Through political discourse, media control, and information manipulation, an idea that was considered unthinkable may become acceptable and even sensible. The Georgian Dream seems to have managed to throw open that window. But maybe this window was cracked open way before?

## **Forfeiting the Cultural Hegemony**

The idea of a nation is aspirational. It does not represent the factual, current state of affairs but is projecting the number of conditions and characteristics for the imagined future community. This is especially true for the democratic system where the future of that community hinges on debate and deliberation - a time-consuming process managed by and through institutions - where the contours

of that future community are continuously being (re)defined.

**Democracy is being reformed daily. It means that the citizens and the body politic, in general, accept the necessity of a compromise with the reality that does not quite match their ideal.**

Between what is now and the desired outcome, there is an intervening time period during which we - the national community - have to adjust our daily lives to the reality of that process and its inevitable imperfections when compared to aspiration. That is why we say that democracy is being reformed daily. It means that the citizens and the body politic, in general, accept the necessity of a compromise with the reality that does not quite match their ideal: for example, human rights are not as universal and well-protected as we would have wished to, the institutions are not quite as efficient, representation is not quite universal, etc.. In other words, an imperfect democracy is not a bug; it is a feature.

**An imperfect democracy is not a bug; it is a feature.**

But what happens if a society, like the Georgian one, has to compromise its culturally hegemonic pro-European (subtext - pro-democratic) narrative with a fundamentally incompatible reality, for example, that of external occupation and 70-year life in a totalitarian state?

One can argue that this forced transfer to coping mode, the emergence of the “trench mentality,” transforms the hegemonic narrative from a living, dynamic program into a cabalistic incantation, a dogma. At the same time, many compromises occur in daily life that often contradict this dogmatic premise.

One of the sharpest commentators of Georgian mentality, novelist Giorgi Akhvlediani (writing under pen-name Aka Morchiladze), wrote in his book *Obole* that “Georgians’ thinking is not fit for the straight roads, it is always like a mountain serpentine.” In political life, that serpentine folding on itself often became the Orwellian “doublethink” - live in the Soviet Union but assert being Georgian, join the Communist party but baptize your children, be a Stalinist but wish for your country’s independence. In such conditions, the narrative may remain dominant, but the accumulated contradictory lived experience means the conviction is not.

In this journal, we have often quoted that figure of around 80% of Georgians are consistently for the country’s European and NATO integration, and a similarly large portion of the population proclaims that democracy is the best system of government for Georgia. Yet, the [cultural barometer surveys](#) have pointed out time and again that the core indicators of tolerance to different opinions and minority groups are not compatible with European liberal values.

During the 2024 election campaign, the opposition and civil society interpreted the polling to suggest that losing the European promise—now finally within grasp—would be unacceptable for the majority of Georgians. The ruling party gambled that Georgians would be too afraid to drop their “coping response” in uncertain international circumstances and would choose to remain “dogmatic nationalists”, that they would not risk running for the (uncertain and distant) European cover.

In doing so, they exposed the shallowness of the hegemonic narrative and prized open the Overton window.



## Calibrating the Extent of the Problem

We are far from suggesting that the Georgian Dream developed a new hegemonic narrative. Their proposal has not won the majority over – even though the party claims 54% voted for it; it has been [convincingly argued](#) that this figure is grossly exaggerated.

Yet, the argument holds sway over at least one-third of voting Georgians who seem to genuinely vote for GD. Given the GD's massive use of propaganda, their alternative narrative—of the decadent West, the EU being culturally incompatible with Georgia, and liberal democracy being dangerous for the nation's survival—is gaining a competitive edge.

What is perhaps worse is that the previously dominant cultural narrative shows signs of becoming dangerously de-linked not only from people's lived experiences but also from their aspirations. To advance the hypothesis of how that might have happened, we need to use another concept of Gramsci – that of “organic intellectuals.” These people – who emerged from a specific social movement or class – formulate and articulate the cultural narrative proper to that class. They are “organic” in the sense that they are intrinsically linked to the lived experiences of their group, as opposed to “historic” intellectuals, who belong to the classes and groups whose cultural domination has passed or is passing.

In recent history, the culturally hegemonic narrative of pro-European, liberal, and democratic Georgia has been carried by the intellectuals emerging from the dominant political class (politicians and public administration), civil society movements, and urban youth. Many of these intellectuals, still active today, were formed in the mid to late 1990s when the liberal agenda seemed

to have triumphed once and for all. This intellectual group has internalized and promoted the idea that rejoining the European family of liberal nations was a historically justified accomplishment, a rational thing to do, but also that it was a choice without a viable alternative – the only other alternative being the “Asian barbarism,” if we use the term that the 1918-21 political class used to refer to Bolshevism.

Yet, two concomitant processes have been undermining this narrative.

One is internal to Georgia: the culturally dominant *intelligentsia* long ignored and dismissed the existence of “other Georgia,” more conservative, mostly outside the capital or big cities, or on the urban social fringe influenced by alternative, traditionalist narratives. There has been a body of printed press that these citizens consumed and that the liberal intellectuals dismissed. But these very papers were famously endorsed by the Georgian Dream's leader Bidzina Ivanishvili., crucially there is the influence of the largest non-state actor – the Georgian Orthodox Church, whose narrative has been pivoting steadily towards conspiracy theories and millennialism.

Throughout the past two decades, the social chasm between the “two Georgias” has been growing: the liberal elites send their children to private schools, to elitist faculties of the universities or abroad, and drive cars rather than take public transport. The peripheral Georgia goes to public schools where the quality of education is dismal, served by aging teachers, and penetrated by the reactionary elements of the Orthodox Church. They often live in financial and social precarity and (reasonably) fear change. The two “bubbles” meet perhaps only as parts of extended families – but even those links have been weakening as urban elites tend to become increasingly atomized.

Another process is external: in Europe and the

United States, illiberal leaders have been articulating their narratives and gaining traction at home. With the Orbans, Vucics, and Trumps of this world, the liberal West is no longer the only choice on the Western menu. Even Western liberal communities were late to realize that this challenge was gaining credibility, and the domestic liberal elite has operated on the assumption that “illiberal international” is a temporary, fringe phenomenon.

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There are no studies that would help us analyze the elite behavior, but we could intuitively argue that the liberal elite in Georgia, convinced of its hegemony at home (underpinned by classical Georgian authors) and its support from abroad (manifested through democracy support programs) has succumbed to hubris. The Georgian liberal elite also wrongly assumed its own homogeneity. Surely, the elite is interested in maintaining the hegemony, and thus, there are costs associated with breaking the ranks. The incentive structure favors talking liberally, even if you have doubts about walking the walk. The persistent authoritarian tendencies of Georgian leaders Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili were checked by their desire to continue belonging to the Western world – as both personal and national choices.

The emergence of Bidzina Ivanishvili and Vladimir Putin’s military challenge to the liberal West have upended this equilibrium. The current illiberal narrative of the GD links well with the global-conspiracy mindset that has long dominated the press and media eagerly consumed by the “other Georgia.” What is more, Ivanishvili’s humble personal background and his apparent personal belief

in shadowy forces that are deciding world affairs rhyme well with beliefs of this wider socio-political group.

Once Ivanishvili, whose personal wealth equaled 24.8% of Georgia’s GDP in 2023, threw his weight behind the illiberal choice, the incentive structure inside the Georgian elite changed, the costs of flipping the loyalties dropped. It is no accident that the current lineup of the Georgian Dream’s visible leadership is overwhelmingly composed of individuals who belonged to the liberal elite – working for international and foreign foundations, and even civil society groups. One of the Georgian Dream’s most ardent illiberal and nativist factions, People’s Power, has in its ranks the former Public Defender who championed the human rights of repressed minorities in the mid-2000s.

Their defection from the liberal hegemonic narrative is perhaps partly a matter of shared worldviews, but incentives posed by money and access to power surely help. The top lineup of the party supporters has benefited from contracts and kickbacks as elite corruption has been on the rise.

But it is not only the elite that was affected. For everyone, the price of disloyalty in the economy, increasingly controlled by few firms with ties to the power center, is also mounting. And importantly, “other Georgia” is also Georgia at the mercy of the Georgian Dream. Having captured the state, it politically weaponizes the social protection net it has expanded.

## **Existence Determines Consciousness?**

The Georgian Dream’s rule has benefited those living in precarity. Mikheil Saakashvili’s rule was marked by a mad race for liberal modernization that has slowed to a muddy trudge. His adminis-

tration is blamed for accentuating inequalities, even though the level of inequality remained high and [essentially unchanged](#). But perceptions matter.

Under Georgian Dream's watch, social handouts have increased considerably: the volume of direct social assistance [grew](#) by 80% in 2019-2023 alone. The share of the population in absolute poverty dropped from 23% (2014) to 11.8% (2023). Especially after the pandemic, the number of social assistance users [skyrocketed](#), reaching 672 thousand in 2023. Public sector employment has also grown exponentially: by the end of 2022, 24% of Georgia's employment (308 thousand jobs) [was in the public sector](#) (civil servants plus other quasi-governmental agencies, local government, plus education system). Even though their salaries are lower than in private business, public employment is often the only employment available in rural areas.

Vast swathes of the Georgian population are imbibing the generous dollops of government propaganda (three pro-government channels consistently top the rating lists and are the ones with nationwide coverage), and are benefiting financially from GD rule. They are still living in precarity, which may surge at the whim of the ruling party which became intertwined with public administration. No wonder that these citizens are receptive and vulnerable to the message coming from the ruling party which tells them that the relatively good days may end in a catastrophe of war.

Sure, many of them may support Europe in principle, accounting for the part of that notorious 80% of pro-European Georgians; they may hear the CSO and opposition calls that the European future is better and more prosperous. But they also live in conditions where today's small but certain financial benefit is preferable to tomorrow's considerable but highly uncertain one.

***The liberal elite has lost its narrative hegemony because it lost its living ties with that “other Georgia” and consistently fails to generate solidarity.***

The liberal elite has lost its narrative hegemony because it lost its living ties with that “other Georgia” and consistently fails to generate solidarity. Iliia Chavchavadze and the 19th-century Georgian aristocratic elite invested heavily in educating the peasants and commoners. The Society for Spreading Literacy in Georgia, funded through voluntary contributions and impounding impoverished aristocrats' lands, has had an enormous impact. The political leaders in the early 20th century emerged from these classes – village teachers' children, petite bourgeoisie, and educated peasants. The 21st-century elites, driven by ideas of economic liberalism and instinctively trusting the market's invisible hand to set things right, may have been too slow to awaken to the need to forge similar linkages.

## Is It Too Late?

***Georgia's democratic dream is weakened by these elections and its pro-democratic elite can no longer count on the hegemony of its ideas.***

The 2024 election results are hotly contested, and the battle for accurately reflecting the voters' will is raging as this article is being written. But one thing is sure: Georgia's democratic dream is weakened by these elections and its pro-democratic elite can no longer count on the hegemony of its ideas. Yet, the country still possesses one of the most vibrant civic cultures and organized civic movements in the region. The resilience of Georgia as a democratic state would depend on its ability to win the battle for the hearts and minds of ordinary Georgians – through solidarity and without counting too much on external help ■

# The Georgian Dream's New Social Contract

**O**n November 28, the Georgian Dream ended Georgia's European integration path by [declaring](#) that the accession negotiations would be removed from the political agenda until 2028. This came as a surprise to many, and angry protests continue even as this publication is released. However, this was not unexpected if one carefully listened and analyzed what Bidzina Ivanishvili and his party said before the elections.

Georgian Dream entered this year's pre-election campaign with unprecedented bluntness, shedding its long-maintained veneer of pro-Western, democratic aspirations. For the last two years ruling party openly indulged in an anti-Western narrative, signaling a stark departure from its earlier promises to align with Euro-Atlantic values and fulfill the criteria for European integration. This was a genuine U-turn for Georgia's political trajectory: not only has the ruling party abandoned its pretense of being a democratic, reform-driven force, but it has also [embraced](#) autocratic rhetoric

while openly demonizing the country's Western partners.

***The Georgian Dream unabashedly offered a new kind of social contract: one in which loyalty to the ruling party comes at the cost of individual freedoms and democratic institutions. Saying firm NO to European integration was an integral and inevitable part of this new social contract.***

When Ivanishvili first entered Georgian politics, his promises inspired hope for a genuinely democratic state—where the citizens of Georgia would stand at the center of political processes. The party's slogans proclaimed that the primary value was to be a human being. In stark contrast, in the 2024 campaign, those promises have been replaced with an unapologetic vow to finalize the consolidation of power, cementing Georgia's drift toward full-



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fledged authoritarianism. The Georgian Dream unabashedly offered a new kind of social contract: one in which loyalty to the ruling party comes at the cost of individual freedoms and democratic institutions. Saying firm NO to European integration was an integral and inevitable part of this new social contract.

## Transmutation of the Georgian Dream's Discourse

Bidzina Ivanishvili's entry into Georgian politics in 2011 was marked by a rhetoric of urgency and hope for democratic renewal. Blaming then-President Mikheil Saakashvili for authoritarian governance and presenting himself as the antidote, Ivanishvili framed his mission as a necessary intervention to save Georgia from the dangers of autocratic rule – protecting human rights, defending property

rights, strengthening civil society, ensuring judicial independence, fostering free media, and creating a vibrant opposition.

In his first public [statement](#), Ivanishvili emphasized the need to build a constitutional framework to safeguard Georgia against the concentration of power. *“The good constitution will be the one which is a result of an agreement within the society and not the one written by me,”* he declared, highlighting his commitment to inclusivity and public participation. He stated, *“We should create such a constitution which will rule out any risk [of the concentration of power in a single person] ... But only the constitution won't protect you against authoritarianism. Society should also be ready for it. I am going to strengthen the society. That is my major goal.”*

Ivanishvili also underscored the critical role of opposition in a healthy democracy. He promised

not only to leave power after implementing fundamental reforms but also to bolster the opposition to hold future governments accountable actively. *“I plan fundamental changes, and after that, I will quit... I plan to go into the opposition to the government we will create. I want to create such a precedent,”* he said, framing himself as a steward of democracy, not its ruler.

As Georgia’s Prime Minister, Ivanishvili’s early rhetoric continued to echo these values. In his first New Year’s [address](#), he vowed to center his government’s policies on human rights, liberties, and welfare. *“Our government has shown society key priorities for establishing a socially fair state in this short period. We have set the 2013 state budget to make it oriented completely towards the people,”* he proclaimed, reinforcing his image as a leader dedicated to democratic governance and social justice.

***The events of December 2024 show that arrest of political opponents, violence against the peaceful demonstrators, and total disregard of the constitutional norms and legal framework have become routine practice.***

Yet, the Bidzina Ivanishvili of 2024 seems almost unrecognizable compared to the reformist of 2011. The lofty promises of democratic renewal have been replaced with a starkly different vision: the opposition must be [prosecuted](#), civil society should be [silenced](#), and institutions should be fully [loyal](#) to the ruling party. Ivanishvili’s rhetoric no longer aims to strengthen democracy but openly promotes the consolidation of autocratic rule. The events of December 2024 show that arrest of political opponents, violence against the peaceful demonstrators, and total disregard of the constitutional norms and legal framework have become routine practice.

The transformation was particularly glaring in the

Georgian Dream’s pre-election campaign, during which the party openly adopted an anti-Western platform, accusing Georgia’s Western partners of interference and undermining the country’s sovereignty. The emphasis was no longer on empowering citizens or ensuring democratic safeguards but insulating the ruling party from criticism and accountability. Instead of fostering judicial independence or strengthening the media, Ivanishvili’s government has [weaponized](#) these institutions to maintain control, normalizing the practices he once claimed to oppose.

The shift towards vocally emphasizing new priorities instead of silently continuing to consolidate a grip on power underscored the betrayal of Ivanishvili’s original stance. This brutal openness can only be interpreted as a deliberate effort to impose a new social contract based on loyalty and submission to the ruling elite, replacing freedoms, liberties, and ideals of accountability.

## Devolution of Foreign Policy from Balancing to Realignment

Bidzina Ivanishvili’s foreign policy rhetoric mirrors the broader evolution of his domestic political discourse. What began as a commitment to Western integration has gradually transformed into an overt rejection of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations. While his initial statements aligned with the principles of partnership with NATO, the EU, and the United States, subtle ambivalence toward Russia was always present. Over time, these undertones gave way to explicit pro-Russian tendencies, culminating in an openly anti-Western stance during the Georgian Dream’s most recent campaign.

When Ivanishvili entered politics, his foreign policy statements reflected a clear pro-Western stance. In 2011, he [declared](#), *“NATO has no alternative in terms of Georgia’s security, and I stand where*

*the absolute majority of the Georgian people stand.”* Following his first meetings with NATO officials, he expressed optimism about Georgia’s chances of joining the alliance and acknowledged the need to address issues such as democratic institutions and judicial reform. Similarly, his [conversations](#) with then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton focused on the *“importance of the strategic partnership between Georgia and the United States”* and praised America’s role in supporting democracy in Georgia.

Yet, even at this early stage, Ivanishvili hinted at a desire for “balance” between the West and Russia. In January 2013, he [pointed](#) to Armenia’s foreign policy as an example for Georgia to follow, arguing that *“having good relations simultaneously with NATO and Russia is possible.”* In a televised interview later that year, he went further, [stating](#), *“I do not believe and cannot imagine that occupation of the territories of its neighbors is in the strategy of the Russian Federation.”* These remarks betrayed a reluctance to acknowledge the reality of Russian aggression, reflecting a softer stance on Moscow compared to his predecessors.

While Ivanishvili’s early foreign policy narrative sought to reconcile Euro-Atlantic aspirations with pragmatism toward Russia, his government’s stance shifted dramatically in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine. The 2024 pre-election campaign marked a turning point as the Georgian Dream adopted an explicitly anti-Western platform. This time, the rhetoric did not include assurances of NATO’s indispensability or the importance of US-Georgia cooperation. Instead, Ivanishvili’s government emphasized “pragmatism” in relations with Russia and [accused](#) Georgia’s Western partners of interfering in the country’s sovereignty and threatening its peace and security.

The deliberate narrative about the West wanting to spill over the war from Ukraine to Georgia rejected Western priorities and affirmed Ivanishvili’s

realignment toward Moscow. The Georgian Dream has signaled a departure from the foreign policy consensus that defined Georgia’s post-independence trajectory by normalizing anti-Western sentiment and downplaying Georgia’s aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration.

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As Ivanishvili saw the fulfillment of EU [recommendations](#) as a direct threat to his power, the evolution of his foreign policy stance immediately reflected his broader political strategy: to isolate Georgia from its Western allies and align the country’s geopolitical orientation with Russian interests. In response to Western criticism of Georgia’s lack of progress in fulfilling democratic criteria necessary for further steps on the EU integration path, Ivanishvili’s early rhetoric about shared democratic values and strategic partnerships with the West has been replaced with warnings against “Western meddling.”

## Changed Discourse on the Occupied Territories

Bidzina Ivanishvili’s narrative regarding Georgia’s occupied territories has evolved significantly, mirroring the broader shifts in his domestic and foreign policy rhetoric. From his earliest statements in 2011, he adopted an unconventional approach, blaming the 2008 war not on Russia but on the Georgian government under Mikheil Saakashvili. Citing the Tagliavini report in his first press conference, Ivanishvili [described](#) Saakashvili’s response to the shelling of Georgian villages as “ab-

*solute recklessness.*” By framing the conflict as a failure of Georgian leadership, Ivanishvili undermined the dominant narrative in Georgian politics, which viewed Russia as the clear aggressor and occupier.

This framing has evolved into a discourse that increasingly aligns with Moscow’s perspective. Recently, Ivanishvili’s rhetoric and the Georgian Dream’s broader narrative have gone beyond criticizing Saakashvili’s handling of the conflict to suggest that the 2008 war was instigated at the behest of Western powers. Such a claim damages Georgia’s legal standing in its fight for territorial integrity and mirrors Kremlin talking points.

This shift coincides with [statements](#) made by Sergey Lavrov claiming that Russia acted in compliance with international law to restrain Georgian “aggressors.” Ivanishvili’s remarks now echo this narrative, which has long been central to Moscow’s justification for its actions in Georgia. Prominent Russian propagandists, such as Margarita Simonyan and Grigori Karasin, have [approved](#) the alignment, further solidifying the perception that Ivanishvili’s government is gradually abandoning Georgia’s long-standing non-recognition policy. By implying that Russia’s so-called “peace enforcement” operation was a legitimate response, Ivanishvili’s government risks implicitly acknowledging the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

One of the most damaging implications of this narrative shift is its impact on Georgia’s diplomatic efforts. The non-recognition policy has been a cornerstone of Georgia’s strategy to counter Russian occupation, sustained primarily through solid support from Western allies. By framing the conflict as provoked by Saakashvili under Western influence, Ivanishvili not only undermines Georgia’s moral and legal arguments against Russian aggression but also weakens international solidarity with Georgia’s territorial claims. This shift, combined

with the rise of anti-Western rhetoric, isolates Georgia from its strategic partners, further eroding the foundations of its non-recognition policy. Perhaps most troubling is the focus on reframing the war as a conflict between Georgians and Ossetians rather than one driven by Russian occupation. This narrative downplays Russia’s role as the primary aggressor and occupier while presenting the conflict as an internal issue. The absence of any acknowledgment of Russia’s accountability signals a deeper strategy: to pave the way for normalized ties with Moscow, potentially at the cost of recognizing sovereignty for Abkhazia and Tskhinvali in some form. In the overall context of Ivanishvili’s policy shift, this new stance on the occupied regions might be seen as a necessary step for restoring diplomatic relations with Russia.

## Bare Thin Legitimacy of the New Social Contract

As the Georgian Dream campaigned on an openly anti-Western platform for the first time, the contrasting shift in Ivanishvili’s internal and external narrative was the main context of the 2024 pre-election environment in Georgia. A [preliminary](#) report of the observer missions accused the ruling party of utilizing state resources unfairly, intimidating voters, and creating an “uneven playing field” for election. Opposition parties and civil society argue that the Georgian Dream’s dominance in media and funding, along with recent laws targeting civil society and foreign-backed organizations, skewed the election in favor of the incumbents. The OSCE and other observers highlighted concerns over a divisive and polarized campaign environment and reported incidents of hate speech against opposition figures. Observers also noted that the transparency and enforcement of campaign financing laws were inadequate, giving the ruling party vast advantages.

As the whole state apparatus was involved in elec-



tion fraud, there are no hopes for proper investigation and fair court hearings of the reported election manipulation evidence. Authorities have formally launched investigations into reported electoral irregularities, but the response has been heavily criticized. Courts in various districts systematically [dismissed](#) complaints from election watchdog groups and opposition parties, citing insufficient evidence or procedural grounds. The watchdogs had reported numerous issues, from voter intimidation to ballot manipulation, raising significant concerns over the election's fairness. Despite mounting local and international calls for a thorough and impartial investigation, the Georgian authorities have thus far rejected or dismissed all complaints, reinforcing skepticism about the impartiality of the judicial review process. This dismissive approach has only intensified the controversy, with critics alleging that the rulings reflect an unwillingness to address the alleged irregularities transparently.

The lack of responsiveness to election irregularities aligns with broader [patterns](#) of power consolidation by the ruling party. Over recent years, the Georgian Dream has been accused of systematically tightening control over key state institutions, including the Central Election Commission and the judiciary, concluding that these bodies are neither transparent nor independent. This control has enabled the party to influence election administration and the legal system significantly, ensuring that allegations of irregularities or electoral misconduct rarely receive independent scrutiny or thorough investigation. The judiciary's routine dismissal of complaints from watchdogs and opposition parties in the 2024 elections exemplifies this trend, reinforcing perceptions that these institutions serve the interests of the Georgian Dream rather than the national interest or upholding democratic principles.

Bidzina Ivanishvili has laid all his cards on the table. By doubling down on anti-Western rhetoric

and pushing forward legislation that removes any remaining pretenses of democratic governance, he has signaled a decisive departure from Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. No longer constrained by the need to project a pro-Western image, Ivanishvili seeks to legitimize his pro-Russian pivot as a new and permanent course for Georgia.

This is not just a shift in policy Ivanishvili is trying to legitimize through his cascade of tricks; it is a redefinition of the country's social contract he is aiming for. Ivanishvili envisions Georgia as a place where alignment with Russia, rather than integration with the West, becomes the cornerstone of national identity and governance. Under this new social contract, loyalty to the ruling party and its chosen geopolitical orientation replace the democratic ideals of accountability, pluralism, and public participation. It is a bargain that prioritizes the consolidation of power over the aspirations of a society that has long sought freedom and alignment with the democratic world.

## Far-Reaching Consequences

The Georgian Dream's pre-election campaign focused on three key points that raised serious concerns about democratic freedoms and the country's future trajectory. First, aimed to hinder civil society and media by imposing restrictive regulations on organizations receiving foreign funding, the ruling party pushed for [adopting](#) a Russian-style law on foreign agents. Second, the party leadership openly [announced](#) the political persecution of opposition groups, mainly through legal proceedings targeting the "collective UNM" (United National Movement). Finally, the Georgian Dream's controversial statements and policy shifts, particularly on the issue of the 2008 Russian aggression against Georgia, suggest an alarming effort to shift blame onto Georgia and the West rather than acknowledging Russia's role in the occupation of Georgian territories. These developments point to a dangerous trend towards authoritarianism, with

the ruling party attempting to neutralize both political opposition and civil society to ensure continued control.

Thus, if the Georgian Dream is to remain in power, the consequences will be far-reaching for Georgia's sovereignty, international relations, and regional stability. The party's actions and rhetoric indicate a desire to align more closely with authoritarian regimes. By shifting the blame for the 2008 aggression away from Russia, the Georgian Dream risks undermining the country's long-standing policy of non-recognition of the occupied regions, thereby compromising Georgia's territorial integrity. This would pave the way for re-establishing diplomatic ties with Russia, which seems to be a key goal for the ruling party. Additionally, Georgia's growing partnership with China, mainly through signing a strategic agreement and [contracting](#) a controversial Chinese company to construct the geopolitically important strategic Anaklia port project, signifies a further shift towards non-democratic alliances. Furthermore, the Georgian Dream's top-level diplomatic [exchanges](#) with Iran and premature international recognition of their electoral victory exclusively from Russia-friendly authoritarian states highlight a broader pivot away from the West and towards a more authoritarian bloc.

The implications of this shift are profound. By abandoning the West, Ivanishvili will isolate Georgia from its allies, undermining the very institutions that have supported the country's progress and jeopardizing the democratic future its citizens have fought to achieve.

***The question is whether Georgians will accept or resist this imposed social contract in pursuit of the democratic values that have defined their national struggle for independence and self-determination.***

The question is whether Georgians will accept or resist this imposed social contract in pursuit of the democratic values that have defined their national struggle for independence and self-determination. Another fundamental issue is whether the West will finally find ways to meaningfully support democratic stakeholders in Georgia to prevent irreparable damage to the country's democratic prospects.

***If Georgia fully aligns with authoritarian powers, it will be a serious blow to the West's regional strategic interests.***

If Georgia fully aligns with authoritarian powers, it will be a serious blow to the West's regional strategic interests. The emergence of two Russian-style regimes, one in Belarus and another in Georgia, would create a significant challenge for NATO and the EU, destabilizing the region further. Not only would this support Russia's war efforts in Ukraine, but it would also strengthen the authoritarian axis, providing Iran and China with more leverage to undermine democratic values and expand their influence, destabilizing global democratic systems and encouraging malign activities against the West.

## Mitigating the Post-Election Crisis

The situation in Georgia has escalated rapidly since election day. Georgian Dream faced significant challenges in legitimizing the scale of election manipulation reported on October 26 and has decided to double down on its authoritarian agenda. The [nomination](#) of Mikheil Kavelashvili—widely regarded as one of the least politically and intellectually capable politicians, yet the most vocal anti-Western figure—as the presidential candidate serves as a stark example of Ivanishvili's drive for total control and a pro-Russian shift. Most crucially, Irakli Kobakhidze's [announcement](#) to halt the

EU integration process until 2028 provides undeniable evidence that the Georgian Dream is making a final push to impose its new social contract. This statement has reinvigorated yet another wave of mass protests in Tbilisi and other major Georgian cities.

A significant development in the current protests is the unprecedented action of hundreds of civil servants from various ministries [openly](#) distancing themselves from and [protesting](#) Georgian Dream's foreign policy through a series of joint statements. This represents a substantial challenge to Ivanishvili's pattern of state capture, which heavily relies on maintaining full control over administrative resources and state institutions. The police have responded to peaceful protesters with unprecedented [brutality](#), reminiscent of OMON-style crackdowns in Russia. Despite this, Georgian society is courageously resisting the coordinated pressure from the Russian Federation and its authoritarian allies. However, the people cannot stand alone indefinitely. Whether Ivanishvili succeeds in imposing his new social contract will largely depend on the immediate and strategic engagement of key Western stakeholders. President Zourabichvili, the last remaining legitimate institution in

the country, has urged the authorities to end the violence and has [called](#) on Georgia's Western partners to take clear and decisive actions in defense of Georgia's democracy.

The EU, NATO, and democratic partners must take immediate action and demonstrate the ability to support the pro-democracy movement in Georgia. First, they must unambiguously reject the election results the Central Election Commission announced as ample documented evidence of widespread fraud and irregularities proves their illegitimacy despite the dismissal by Ivanishvili's courts. Second, targeted sanctions should be imposed on Bidzina Ivanishvili, key Georgian Dream leaders, and officials involved in the election manipulation. This would demonstrate unwavering support for Georgia's democracy and will finally disperse the Georgian Dream's deceptive manipulations so that they can restore relations with the West and continue EU integration. Most importantly, these actions would weaken the regime's ability to suppress opposition, signaling to lower-ranking officials that the international community backs the fight for free and fair elections and there will be consequences for implementing illegal and oppressive policies ■

# The Backsliding of Georgia's European Dream

**O**n November 28, the Georgian Dream (GD) declared that it would remove the issue of accession negotiations from the EU-Georgia bilateral agenda, effectively ending Georgia's EU membership bid during its tenure, as well as during the tenure of the current European Commission. While other authors in this volume took a closer look at the implications of this decision and the events that followed GD's rejection of the EU path, we will look into the current relations between the EU and Georgia regarding fulfilling accession criteria and preparing for membership. This is particularly important since the GD leaders and talking heads have been arguing that in fact, the Georgian leadership would continue implementing the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA).

On October 30, 2024, the European Commission published its annual communication on enlargement policy and accompanying country [reports](#).

For Georgia, this marked the release of its second report under the revised accession methodology introduced in 2020. The findings paint a troubling picture: while Moldova and Ukraine are advancing rapidly toward EU accession, Georgia is stagnating—and, in some cases, backsliding.

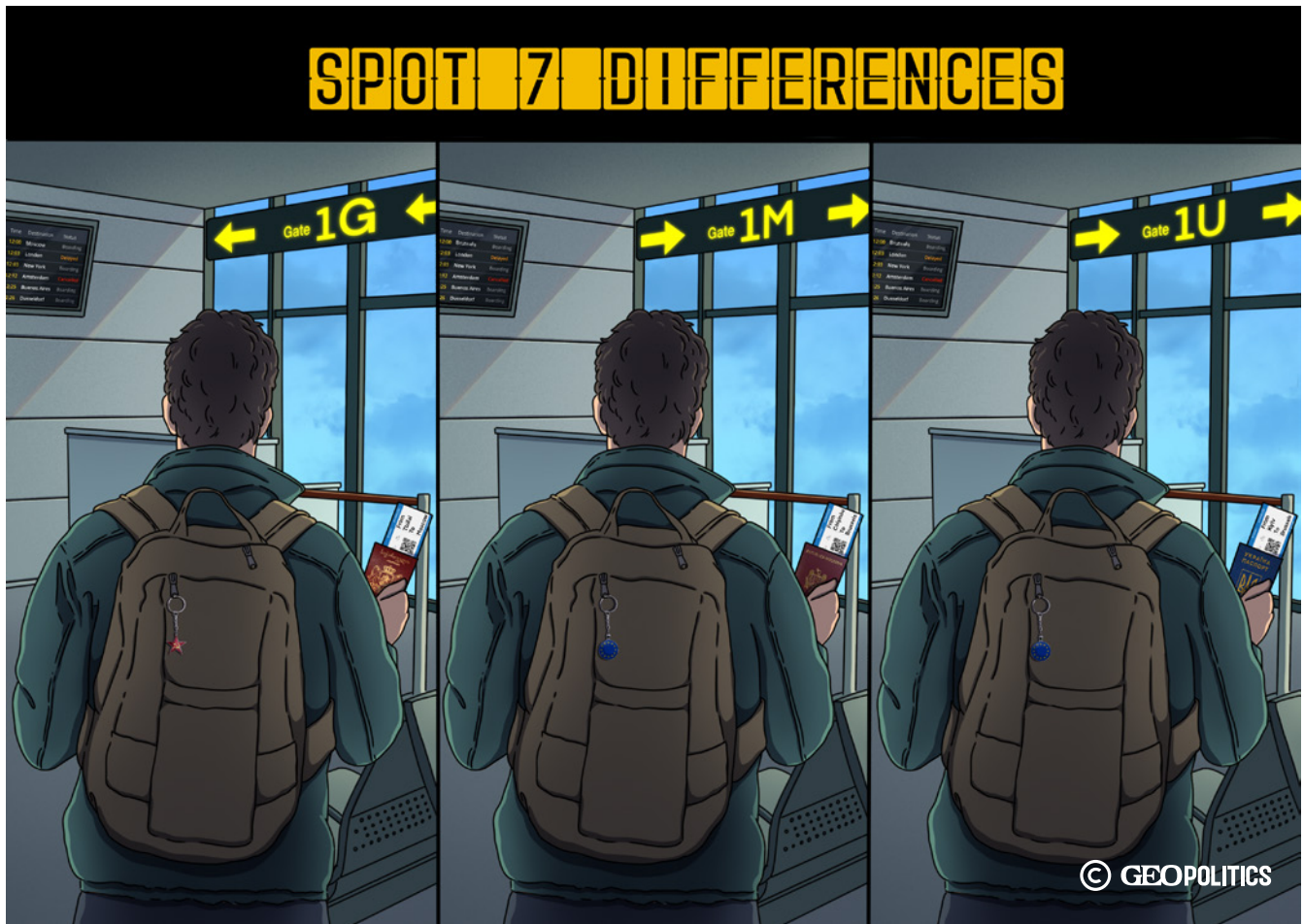
The report evaluates 33 policy areas, or chapters, grouped into six clusters: (1) Fundamentals; (2) Internal Market; (3) Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth; (4) Green Agenda and sustainable connectivity; (5) Resources, agriculture, and cohesion; (6) External relations.

Similar reports were also published for Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo (not recognized by 5 EU member states and Serbia) as well as for Ukraine, Moldova, and Türkiye. Although the EU's General Affairs Council [declared](#) in June 2018 that Türkiye's accession process had “effectively come to a standstill”—with no further chapters to be opened



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or closed and no progress on modernizing the EU-Türkiye Customs Union—the EU continues to evaluate Türkiye’s integration progress and includes it in its annual assessments.

The EU’s enlargement policy [communication](#) offered an intriguing indication regarding the timeline for future enlargement. Specifically, the European Commission conveyed an encouraging message to Montenegro, highlighting that “the government of Montenegro signaled its objective to close accession negotiations by the end of 2026.” The Commission expressed its readiness to support this ambitious goal by proposing the provisional closure of additional chapters by the end of 2024 and outlining a substantial agenda for 2025, provided the necessary conditions were fulfilled.

The European Union evaluates a country’s level of preparation using a five-grade scale: (a) early stage of preparation, (b) some level of preparation, (c)

moderately prepared, (d) good level of preparation, and (e) well advanced. For measuring progress, it uses four levels: (a) backsliding, (b) no progress, (c) limited progress, (d) some progress, and (e) very good progress. Additionally, the report outlines specific recommendations the country should implement in the coming year. The enlargement report serves as a critical tool—an “X-ray” of sorts—highlighting a country’s challenges and identifying the policy areas requiring attention to advance toward EU membership. These recommendations are vital for ensuring continued progress toward European integration.

## How the EU views Georgia

On June 27, 2024, the European Union effectively [decided](#) to pause Georgia’s EU accession process. Nevertheless, much like in the case of Türkiye, the EU continues to monitor the performance of candidate countries and publishes annual enlargement

Cluster # 1	Cluster # 2	Cluster # 3	Cluster # 4	Cluster # 5	Cluster # 6	Total
38	25	24	11	14	6	117

*Number of recommendations by clusters that EU gave to Georgia in 2024; Source: Commission Staff Working Document; Georgia report 2024*

reports. A key area of focus in these reports is the “Fundamentals” cluster, which comprises five critical policy fields: Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights), Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom, and Security), Chapter 5 (Public Procurement), Chapter 18 (Statistics), and Chapter 32 (Financial Control).

This cluster holds exceptional importance and can be described as the “engine” of the accession process, as progress in these areas dictates the overall pace of negotiations. According to the EU negotiation frameworks for [Ukraine](#) and [Moldova](#), any regression in the Fundamentals cluster could result in the suspension of accession talks. Furthermore, these chapters are always the first to open and the last to close during negotiations, reflecting their central role in the EU accession process.

The EU has assessed Georgia as being at “some level of preparation “ in the five chapters of Cluster #1. However, when evaluating progress, the EU noted that since November 2023, Georgia has been backsliding in Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights). No progress was recorded for Chapter 32, limited progress for Chapters 24 and 18, and some progress for Chapter 5.

***Georgia received 117 recommendations that the authorities must address by the following EU assessment in autumn 2025. This means the EU’s evaluation will focus not only on the fulfillment of the 9-step criteria but also on the additional recommendations outlined in each chapter.***

Georgia received 117 recommendations that the authorities must address by the following EU assessment in autumn 2025. This means the EU’s evaluation will focus not only on the fulfillment of the 9-step criteria but also on the additional recommendations outlined in each chapter. Notably, 32% of these recommendations pertain to the Fundamentals cluster.

In its assessment, the EU applied the “backsliding” grade for the first time, highlighting the deteriorating state of Georgia’s judiciary, particularly in Chapter 23. (See the table above)

The European Union places significant emphasis on Cluster #6, which covers Chapters 30 (External Relations) and 31 (Foreign, Security, and Defense Policy). A key focus is ensuring that candidate countries align their foreign and security policies with the EU’s. As of the end of September 2024, Georgia’s alignment rate stood at 49%, indicating it is only halfway to achieving complete alignment. This marks a slight decline from 50% in 2023, though it has improved from 44% in 2022.

Georgia’s alignment challenges are underscored by its recent actions, including signing a Strategic Partnership agreement with China, which suggests that alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is not a top priority. Additionally, Georgia has suspended participation in EU crisis management missions and operations under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Since June 2023, the number of direct flights between Georgia and Russia has also increased significantly.

ALB	RS	MNE	BiH	MKD	TR	GEO	UA	MD
100%	51%	100%	100%	100%	5%	49%	95%	90%
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes

*Alignment with EU Foreign and Security Policy. State of Play among EU Candidate Countries. Source: Commission Staff Working Documents; Country reports of 2024.*

Among EU candidate countries, only Georgia and Ukraine (due to its ongoing war) do not participate in EU crisis management missions and operations. Excluding Türkiye, Georgia's CFSP alignment rate is the lowest among candidate countries and even lags behind Serbia, led by pro-Russian President Aleksandar Vučić. (See the table above)

A comparison between the EU enlargement reports on Georgia for 2023 and 2024 reveals that the country's level of preparedness in the Fundamentals cluster has remained unchanged. However, in terms of progress, Georgia either regressed or showed no improvement compared to the previous year. A similar trend is observed in Chapters 30 and 31. (See the table below)

Chapter	Level of preparedness in 2023	Level of preparedness in 2024
# 23 Judiciary and fundamental rights	Some progress	Some progress
# 24 J Justice, freedom and security	Some progress	Some progress
# 5 Public procurement	Some progress	Some progress
# 18 Statistics	Some progress	Some progress
# 32 Financial control	Some progress	Some progress
# 30 External relations	Moderate	Moderate
# 31 Foreign, security, and defense policy	Moderate	Moderate

Source: Commission Staff Working Document; Georgia report 2024 and 2023

Chapter	Assessment of progress in 2023	Assessment of progress in 2024
# 23 Judiciary and fundamental rights	Limited	Backsliding
# 24 Justice, freedom and security	Some	Limited
# 5 Public procurement	Good	Some
# 18 Statistics	Limited	Limited
# 32 Financial control	No progress	No progress
# 30 External relations	Limited	Limited
# 31 Foreign, security, and defense policy	Limited	No progress

Source: Commission Staff Working Document; Georgia report 2024 and 2023

Georgia made either limited progress or no progress in the Fundamentals cluster. Moreover, in one of the most critical chapters, Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, the country experienced backsliding. (See the table above)

**A comparison of the 2024 EU enlargement reports for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia reveals that, since 2023, Ukraine and Moldova have shown significant progress, while Georgia has lagged behind.**

A comparison of the 2024 EU enlargement reports for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia reveals that, since 2023, Ukraine and Moldova have shown sig-

nificant progress, while Georgia has lagged behind. Analyzing the reports alongside the EU's decision to initiate accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova highlights that achieving some to a good level of progress is key—a benchmark that Georgia has yet to meet.

Using the European Stability Initiative's (ESI) [methodology](#) and scoreboard (backsliding = 0, no progress = 1, limited progress = 2, some progress = 3, and good progress = 4), it becomes evident that Moldova and Ukraine outperformed Georgia over the past year. In the seven key chapters assessed, Georgia experienced backsliding or no progress in three areas, limited progress in three others, and only managed some progress in one. (See the table below)



Chapters #	Ukraine	Moldova	Georgia
23	3	3	0
24	3	3	2
18	3	4	2
32	2	3	1
5	2	3	3
30	2	4	2
31	4	4	1
<b>Total Score</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>11</b>

The European Union has outlined 117 recommendations for the Georgian authorities to implement. These recommendations carry significant weight, as they could eventually become opening, interim, or closing benchmarks if accession negotiations with Georgia are initiated. However, given the current domestic context, some of these recommendations may prove challenging for Georgia.

One notable recommendation is for Georgia to align its national legislation with EU standards by lifting restrictions on EU nationals' acquisition of agricultural land. This poses a constitutional challenge, as Article 19 (4) of the Georgian Constitution stipulates that agricultural land, as a resource of special importance, can only be owned by the state, a self-governing unit, Georgian citizens, or associations of Georgian citizens. Exceptional cases require an organic law passed by a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

This constitutional restriction is rooted in the political platform of the ruling Georgian Dream party, which came to power in 2012 with a promise to prohibit foreigners from purchasing agricultural land in Georgia.

The European Union also advises Georgian authorities to harmonize national legislation on VAT and

excise duties with the EU acquis. However, under Georgia's [Organic Law on Referendums](#), referendums may be held to introduce new types of national taxes—except excise taxes—or to raise the upper threshold of existing tax rates based on their type.

These recommendations from the EU must be taken seriously, as they will remain on the table until the Georgian authorities address them adequately and align with EU standards.

## Falling Behind Moldova and Ukraine

Even if the Georgian Dream had not rescinded the EU accession process in November 2028, Georgia had already lost a lot of time compared to Ukraine and Moldova. This setback would have been difficult to recover even if the government had pursued a fast-track approach to implementing EU conditionalities. Meanwhile, Moldova and Ukraine have advanced significantly on the EU track, moving closer to launching accession negotiations, likely in the first half of 2025 under Poland's rotating EU presidency. The gap between Georgia and its two neighbors has widened. Moldova, in particular, has held free and fair elections, maintained a pro-European president, and voted in favor of the

referendum to enshrine EU accession in its Constitution.

***The European Commission's latest enlargement report highlighted that Georgian authorities are not genuinely committed to the EU accession process, resulting in increasingly strained and toxic relations between the two sides.***

These developments have led the EU to decouple Georgia from Ukraine and Moldova and treat it as a separate case. The distinction is apparent – Kyiv and Chisinau are on a European track, while Tbilisi is not. The European Commission's latest enlargement report highlighted that Georgian authorities

are not genuinely committed to the EU accession process, resulting in increasingly strained and toxic relations between the two sides. The November 28 announcement to suspend the EU accession process until 2028 will irreversibly damage these relations.

It remains uncertain whether the EU will opt for another “Big Bang” enlargement, as it did in 2004, encompassing the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova, or pursue a more tailored, country-specific approach. What is clear, however, is that this could represent the final chapter of EU enlargement—and Georgia is in danger of being left out. The major misstep has already been made on November 28 ■

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