

GEO POLITICS

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GLADIATORS

FROM FEBRUARY 22



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GEO POLITICS

Issue №15
February, 2025

Our Mission

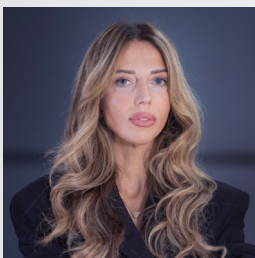
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual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

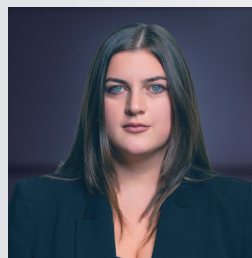
In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOPolitics* echoes the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia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

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



Ana Khurtsidze

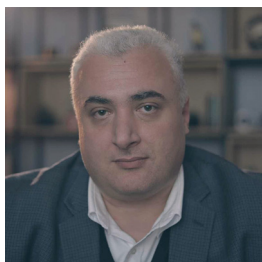
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Irina Gurgenchashvili

Executive Director of
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Contributors



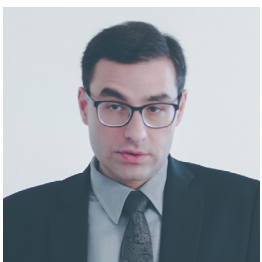
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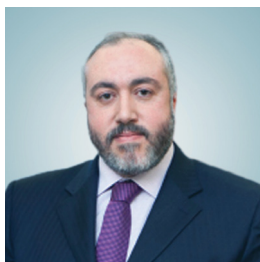
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Temuri Yakobashvili Contributor

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Natalie Sabanadze 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.



Jaba Devdariani Contributor

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.

Guest Contributor



Grigol Mgaloblishvili Guest Contributor

Ambassador Grigol Mgaloblishvili is a career diplomat who has served in the Georgian Foreign Service for 20 years. Before joining the National Defence College of the UAE as an Interim Dean/Associate Professor he was a Visiting Distinguished Faculty Member of the College of International Security Affairs at National Defence University (NDU), Washington DC. Throughout his career he served as the Prime-Minister of Georgia, Permanent Representative of Georgia to NATO, as the Georgian Ambassador to Türkiye and as a non-resident Georgian Ambassador to Albania and Bosnia Herzegovina. He also held different positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, such as the Director of European Department and Deputy Director of the US Department.

As Gladiators Continue Defending Ukraine's Freedom, Global, Regional, and Domestic Disruptions Cast a Shadow Over the Future

This February marks three years since Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, a war whose outcome remains uncertain but whose significance is undeniable. Ukraine's valiant "gladiators", led by their courageous president, have shattered the myth of Russian military invincibility, galvanized the Western world against Moscow, unified Europeans and Americans in unprecedented support, and accelerated the momentum for future EU enlargement.

Weakened by the war and struggling under mounting costs, Russia increasingly relies on North Korean fighters, Iranian drones and ammunition, and Chinese financial and economic lifelines—solidifying a new axis of authoritarianism. With the Donald Trump presidency poised to disrupt the global order, reshape the approach to Ukraine, and recalibrate the West's stance on China, the future of European security—including that of Ukraine and Georgia—hangs in the balance. The anticipated peace deal could determine the continent's stability for decades, and Georgians are watching closely, uncertain on which side of the *iron jalousie* their country will land. As the pro-Russian, increasingly authoritarian Georgian Dream (GD) government drags Georgia deeper into Moscow's orbit and away from the Western democratic world, the country's prospects for democracy are dwindling—countered only by the resilience of Georgia's pro-democracy forces and the West's willingness to isolate the Ivanishvili regime.

The latest issue of *GEOpolitics* opens with a joint article of the contributors about the potential scenarios for the unfolding crisis in Georgia. Since November 2024, daily protests, arrests, and government crackdowns have drawn parallels to Belarus, Serbia, Venezuela, Armenia and Ukraine. While GD tightens its grip through repression and media control, the leaderless protest movement remains resilient. Georgia risks full-scale Belarussian-style isolation, Serbia's hybrid autocracy, or Venezuela's prolonged instability. A Maidan-style uprising seems unlikely unless GD escalates to lethal force. The only viable alternative is forcing new elections through sustained protests, international sanctions, and economic decline, pressuring Ivanishvili into retreat. As Georgia drifts from the West, its future hinges on whether resistance can outlast repression and whether the West will act decisively.

Shota Gvineria continues the topic of the Georgian internal crisis by analyzing its root causes—state-building struggles shaped by Soviet legacies, weak institutions, and external pressure from Russia. The lack of independent political bodies to mediate the crisis highlights Georgia's fragile democracy. Civic immaturity, distrust, and a political culture that equates power-sharing with weakness further deepen the crisis. While protests indicate rising civic engagement, a fragmented opposition, lack of media pluralism, and growing repression hinder democratic progress. The path forward depends on sustained grassroots activism, strong international backing, and an opposition capable of overcoming internal divisions.

Sergi Kapanadze switches to analyzing the Georgian Dream's foreign policy, describing it as isolationist, damaging, and minimalist. Prioritizing regime survival over national interests, GD has severed key strategic ties, leading to diplomatic isolation. No major power has recognized its election victory, and its foreign engagement is now limited to authoritarian-leaning states while its presence in the EU and US has significantly weakened. Strategic partnerships with the US, UK, and EU are either suspended or frozen, excluding Georgia from key international security and European enlargement discussions. Meanwhile, GD's anti-Western rhetoric and growing reliance on China and regional autocracies further alienate traditional allies. As it abandons Euro-Atlantic aspirations, Georgia risks long-term marginalization, deeper alignment with authoritarian regimes, and the erosion of its international credibility. Alternative diplomatic efforts by President Salome Zourabichvili, opposition parties, and civil society remain Georgia's last line of defense in preserving its foreign policy priorities and engagement with the West.

Temuri Yakobashvili argues that Georgia's political disruption comes not from within the GD regime but from a new generation demanding justice, democracy, and a return to the West. Unlike their predecessors, these young citizens reject GD's push toward isolation and autocracy. This local upheaval mirrors Trump's global disruption—both challenging entrenched systems in unpredictable ways. While Trump's moves are strategic, GD's flailing attempts to cling to power, even invoking “deep state” rhetoric, expose its desperation. How these parallel disruptions play out will determine Georgia's resilience and whether Trump's global reset leads to order or chaos.

The unraveling of the regional order and the increasing role of Türkiye and Russia in the South Caucasus is the focus of Jaba Devdariani's piece.

He argues that as Georgia remains trapped in a deepening legitimacy crisis, the shifting geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus risks sidelining Tbilisi in a renewed contest between Russia and Türkiye – historical frenemies. Moscow and Ankara now maneuver for regional influence, with Türkiye rising and Russia seeking to block Western engagement. Azerbaijan's growing ties with both powers and the 3+3 format underscore Georgia's declining agency against the background of fading Western influence. To avoid becoming a pawn in this geopolitical game, Georgia must restore legitimate governance, strengthen ties with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, and reengage with the West before it loses strategic relevance entirely.

Grigol Mgaloblishvili continues with the regional topic, drawing on the lessons that Georgians can learn from the swift downfall of a prominent dictatorial Assad regime. Assad's collapse exposes how dictators maintain power through an illusion of stability that can shatter instantly, leaving loyalists abandoned—much like those propping up the Georgian Dream. Russia's failure to save Bashar al-Assad, despite its military presence, underscores Moscow's waning global influence, debunking GD's fear-mongering about inevitable Russian intervention. Moreover, Türkiye's rising regional dominance and realignment with the West challenge GD's anti-Western rhetoric. For Ivanishvili, Assad's fate serves as a warning: repression and Russian allegiance guarantee neither survival nor lasting power.

Natalie Sabanadze switches the focus from an unraveling new global and regional order to the increasing geopolitical costs that Russia is incurring after three years of bloody war in Ukraine. Despite recent battlefield gains, Moscow's strategic position has weakened, failing to achieve its broader ambitions. The loss of Syria, increased dependence on China, Türkiye's growing influence, and setbacks in the Black Sea illustrate

Russia's diminished global standing and rising toll. In the South Caucasus, its former dominance is eroding as it aligns more closely with Azerbaijan and Iran while struggling to counter Turkish expansion. While the Georgian Dream's pivot toward Moscow offers a symbolic win, it remains fragile due to domestic opposition. With Western aid to Ukraine holding firm, Russia seeks a ceasefire—not for peace, but to regroup for future conflicts. Rather than reshaping the global order in its favor, the war has only exposed Moscow's vulnerabilities, raising the stakes for its next moves.

Thornike Gordadze argues that targeted Western sanctions could fracture the Georgian Dream from within. While Ivanishvili has long prepared for them, framing his *Credit Suisse* dispute as Western coercion, GD's elites—deeply tied to the West through assets and financial interests—never expected full isolation. As visa bans and asset freezes take effect, internal dissent is growing, with some business figures voicing concern. If

the West acts decisively, sanctions could trigger a chain reaction, forcing GD's powerbrokers to reconsider their allegiance. Once the first matchstick is lit, the entire GD matchbox could go up in flames.

Vano Chkhikvadze closes the issue with a criticism of the EU's inability to manufacture consensus over Georgia's democratic backsliding. While authoritarian powers offer unconditional support to the GD, the EU's response has been weak, relying on symbolic measures like suspending diplomatic visa-free travel. Meanwhile, GD deepens ties with Russia and China, securing alternative financial inflows. With Brussels paralyzed, only unilateral action by individual EU states—sanctions, diplomatic freezes, and rejecting GD envoys—can prevent Georgia's full slide into authoritarian influence ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

Content

What is Next for Georgia? Scenarios for the Unfolding Crisis	10
JOINT ARTICLE	

The Roots of Georgia’s Political Crisis	23
SHOTA GVINERIA	

The Georgian Dream’s Isolationist, Damaging, and Minimalist Foreign Policy	32
SERGI KAPANADZE	

NEED FOR SPEED	42
Political Disruptors and Disrupted Politics	
TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI	

Borderlands Redux:	48
Are Türkiye and Russia Reprising the “Frenemies” Competition?	
JABA DEVDARIANI	

Assad’s Downfall: A Lesson for Georgia	55
GRIGOL MGALOBlishvili	

Three Years of War: Russia’s Strategic Balance Sheet	60
NATALIE SABANADZE	

Can Targeted Sanctions Set the Georgian Dream on Fire?	67
THORNIKE GORDADZE	

Without Breaking Unanimity the EU Shall Not Pass	74
VANO CHKHIKVADZE	

What is Next for Georgia?

Scenarios for the Unfolding Crisis

What is going to happen in Georgia? Will the events unfold like in Belarus? Or like in Armenia? How about Venezuela or Serbia? These have been some of the frequently asked questions since November 2024, when the Georgian Dream (GD) decided to formally reverse the country's long-standing European integration path, sparking almost non-stop protests throughout the country.

Since November 2024, Rustaveli Avenue has been closed every evening along with large-scale protests on New Year's Eve, general strikes, marches of different social groups, and daily demonstrations at the public broadcaster, demanding that the people's voice be heard on state TV. Public broadcaster is now as much a part of Ivanishvili's power structure as the law enforcement agencies and the judiciary. This daily effort and perseverance distinguish current protests from any other in Georgia's history.

In the past week, self-organized protest groups decided to hold a demonstration at the entrance to the capital, which, if it led to a mass gathering, would block the road. In response, on Friday, 31 January, a new government decree was [issued](#), designating roads as part of a list of strategic in-

frastructure sites, thereby criminalizing their closure. Despite numerous [threats](#) and attempts at intimidation from both Georgian Dream leaders and law enforcement agencies, the protesters gathered again on 2 February, which led to renewed [violence](#), including brutal beatings and arrests. Since November of the previous year, over 500 people have been imprisoned with more than 40 facing criminal accusations. Among those arrested were the *Coalition for Change* leaders, including [Nika Gvaramia](#), [Zurab Japaridze](#), [Nika Melia](#), [Elene Khoshtaria](#), and other politician figures. Additionally, former Georgian Dream Interior Minister and Prime Minister, now leader of the *For Georgia* party, Giorgi Gakharia, was physically [attacked](#) by the Georgian Dream member of Parliament.

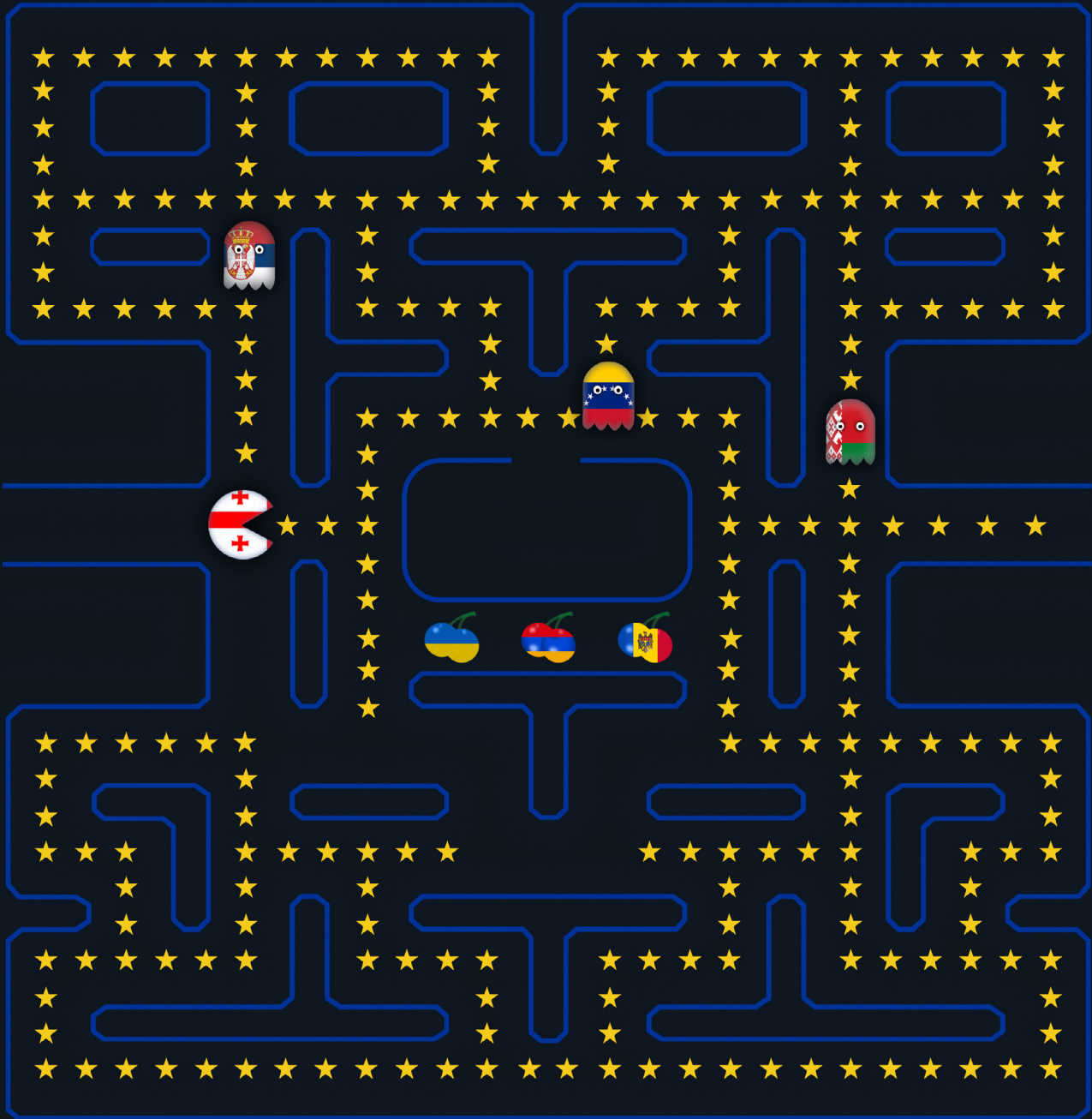
Prominent cases of detained persons include Mzia Amaghlobeli, the founder of the Georgian online media outlets, *Batumelebi* and *Netgazeti*, who has been on a [hunger strike](#) since her arrest on 12 January. Alongside her, Georgian actor Andro Chichinadze [has also become](#) a symbol of this struggle. In his support, *the Vaso Abashidze New Theatre* created a [manifesto](#) calling for the release of all political prisoners. The theatre has begun a [nationwide tour](#), performing in various cities and regions across Georgia, engaging with audiences



Joint Perspectives of:

Sergi Kapanadze, Natalie Sabanadze, Temuri Yakobashvili, Jaba Devdariani and Vano Chkhikvadze.

Mission: Avoid Authoritarian Path



and raising awareness about the ongoing political crisis. Notably, “Fire to the Oligarchy” has become an unofficial motto of the protests.

The Georgian Dream’s repressions have plunged Georgia into international isolation. Western capitals have condemned the government’s actions, and while sanctions against individuals in the ruling elite have become widespread (see the table below), discussions are underway for more punitive measures. As a result, Georgia’s foreign policy and security have become minimalistic, leaving the country wondering in the void of changing international politics, which we discuss in detail elsewhere in this issue. The collateral damage of this crisis is the welfare and security of Georgians who are now facing growing economic, financial, and political turmoil. Considering all these factors, the naïve but honest question about what comes next and whether or not Georgian events are comparable with those of other protest movements deserves merit.

While we cannot predict the future, we can analyze possible scenarios. The crisis might explode or implode, depending on how the events unfold. The contributors to this journal put their heads together to examine various scenarios and their probabilities in a situation in which the Georgian Dream remains intransigent and the protest movement—through resilience—has yet to force a breakthrough. Roughly, there are three scenarios. The Georgian Dream prevails in one, and its rule becomes fully authoritarian. Sub-scenarios will only differ regarding the legitimacy of the regime, its fragility, and resources to deal with the economic challenges. In the second scenario, new elections are called, or the change of power happens due to the peaceful protests and the high pressure. In the third one, the crisis lingers on, leaving all possible options open. Each of these crises resembles similar processes in other countries around the globe in the recent decade but also has striking differences from each of them.

SANCTIONED GEORGIAN DREAM OFFICIALS AND ASSOCIATES

As of January 14, 2025

	Name	Position	U.S.**	U.K.	LITH	LATV	EST	UKR
1	Bidzina Ivanishvili	Honorary Chairman of Georgian Dream	■					
2	Irakli Kobakhidze	Prime Minister			■	■	■	■
3	Grigol Liliashvili	Head of State Security Service			■	■	■	■
4	Kakha Kaladze	Mayor of Tbilisi			■	■	■	■
5	Vakhtang Gomelauri	Minister of Internal Affairs	■	■	■	■	■	■
6	Shalva Bedoidze	First Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs			■	■	■	■
7	Ioseb Chelidze	Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs			■	■	■	■
8	Aleksandre Darakhvelidze	Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs		■	■	■	■	■
9	Giorgi Butkhuzi	Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs			■	■	■	■
10	Zviad Kharazishvili	Director of Special Tasks Department	■	■	■	■	■	■
11	Mileri Lagazauri	Deputy Director of Special Task Department	■	■	■	■	■	■
12	Mirza Kezevadze	Deputy Director of Special Task Department	■		■	■	■	■
13	Vazha Siradze	Head of Patrol Police			■	■	■	■
14	Teimuraz Kupatadze	Head of Criminal Police			■	■	■	■
15	Sulkhan Tamazashvili	Director of Tbilisi Police Department		■				
16	Giorgi Gabitashvili	Prosecutor General				■	■	
17	Koka Katsitadze	Head of Special Investigation Service				■	■	
18	Otar Romanov-Partskhaladze	Former Chief Prosecutor	■		■			■
19	Irakli Karseladze	Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure			■			■
20	Irakli Rukhadze	Owner of Imedi TV			■			■
21	Kakhi Bekauri	Chairman of the Communications Commission			■			■
22	Viktor Japaridze	Owner of POSTV, Georgian Dream MP			■			■
23	Mamuka Mdinardze	Georgian Dream MP			■	■	■	■
24	Dimitri/Dito Samkharadze	Georgian Dream MP			■	■	■	■
25	Tea Tsulukiani	Georgian Dream MP			■	■	■	■
26	Zviad Shalamberidze	Georgian Dream MP			■	■	■	■
27	Mikheil Chinchaladze	Judge, judicial 'clan' leader			■	■	■	■
28	Levan Murusidze	Judge, judicial 'clan' leader			■	■	■	■
29	Irakli Shengelia	Judge			■			■
30	Valerian Tsertsvadze	Former judge			■			■
31	Shalva Tadumadze	Deputy Chairman of Supreme Court			■			■
32	Koba Chagunava	Judge				■		■
33	Nino Enukidze	Judge				■		■
34	Lela Mildemberger	Judge				■		■
35	Lela Tsagareishvili	Judge				■		■
36	Manuchar Tsatsua	Judge				■		■
37	Zviad Tsekvava	Judge				■		■
38	Aleksandre Ivanishvili	Brother of Bidzina Ivanishvili						■
39	Ketevan Kharaidze	Sister-in-law of Bidzina Ivanishvili						■
40	Ucha Mamatsashvili	Cousin of Bidzina Ivanishvili						■
41	Tate Mamatsashvili	Son of Ucha Mamatsashvili						■
42	Giorgi Kobakhidze	Father of the Prime Minister				■		■
43	Goga Khaindrava	Georgian Dream Ideologue				■		■
44	Zurab Makharadze	Leader of Alt-Info		■				■
45	Konstantine Morgoshia	Leader of Alt-Info		■				■

TYPES OF SANCTIONS

■ U.S. has imposed visa restrictions on ~100 other individuals, including: members of the Georgian Dream party, members of Parliament, senior government and municipal figures, law enforcement and security officials, corrupt business leaders, pro-regime elites, some private citizens, and family members of all these individuals. The names of these individuals are not made public due to visa confidentiality laws.

■ Latvia announced additional sanctions (travel and visa bans) on 13 Georgian citizens on Dec. 20 2024. However, they did not specify which individuals.

*** Germany has also imposed entry bans on 9 Georgian citizens "primarily responsible for the violence against protesters and opposition members". Their identities remain unknown.

Source: [Transparency International Georgia](https://www.transparencyinternational.org)

Serbian Scenario: Authoritarianism Under the EU Shadow

Many have compared the events in Georgia with those in Serbia during the last decade. For years, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has maintained an authoritarian system while keeping the European Union engaged. Resistance from the opposition, public protests, elections (often snap ones), and student rallies have not resulted in a change of power. In this, Georgia and Serbia resemble each other.

The events since November 2024 also share many similarities. Massive anti-corruption student protests in Belgrade and hundreds of other towns, cities, and villages resemble the Georgian protest dynamic. Georgians even attempted to block a highway, similar to Serbian students in January 2025.

For decades, Aleksandar Vučić's government has promoted conspiracy theories, branded civil society as spies on foreign pay, and increasingly channeled traditional religious conservatism. The "Vučić system" is based on three pillars: a party-based patronage network, dominant security services, and unfettered propaganda. Leveraging economic ties for political benefit and balancing the interests of the EU, China, and Russia in politics and economy has become a hallmark of Serbia's foreign policy.

The Georgian Dream has already installed a political system fairly similar to that of Vučić.

In this sense, the Georgian Dream has already installed a political system fairly similar to that of Vučić. The missing element is the degree to which Belgrade managed to ingratiate itself with Brussels despite these shortfalls.

The Serbian scenario seemed to be the natural direction the Georgian Dream regime took before the 26 October parliamentary polls. However, the 28 November announcement of breaking membership talks with Brussels and open hostility toward the European Union set Tbilisi off that track.

To revert to the Serbian scenario, the Georgian Dream government would need to take several steps:

First, it will need to appoint a Prime Minister with a more conciliatory attitude towards Brussels and change the tone from hostile to skeptical. Anna Brnabić served that purpose in Serbia from 2017 to 2024. This, however, does not seem likely. Not because Kobakhidze cannot be disposed of – an oligarch can eliminate any pawn from his chessboard. However, to become conciliatory with Brussels, the whole propaganda machinery has to be revamped, the message box changed, and the party line distorted. That does not seem likely or feasible at this point.

Second, the Georgian Dream needs to acquire tangible economic leverage on Brussels, something which is impossible. The GD tried to advance the idea of the trans-Black Sea power cable with assent from both Baku and Budapest, but the talk of that initiative has died down, and its value does not trump the value of democracy in the country. To get Brussels' interest back, the Georgian Dream needs the economy to be on its side. For Serbia, a prospective lithium mine is one such leverage that Brussels cannot ignore. Moreover, Serbia is an economic powerhouse of the Balkans. Georgia is not.

Third, Georgia needs to become a part of a regional geopolitical solution, not a problem. Vučić's key success has been to transform Belgrade's role into a regional power-broker and EU partner, not a spoiler, in relation to, for example, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This allowed Belgrade to be more exigent on Kosovo. In contrast, Georgia

has placed itself firmly in the shadow of Russia, countering Western interests in the region, helping Moscow to sidestep sanctions, and embracing its anti-Western narratives.

Sacking public servants, getting rid of the Parliamentary Research Center, cutting the Civil Service Bureau, and removing NGOs from the consultation boards of civil service contradicts the Serbian way.

Fourth, the Georgian Dream needs to make public administration compatible with that of the EU. With all of its anti-democratic drift, Vučić consolidated Serbian public administration and became an efficient partner of the EU bureaucracy. Georgia had a good track record of this and the potential of doing the same; however, the Georgian Dream's recent dismantlement of the independent civil service delivered a severe blow to this element. Sacking public servants, getting rid of the Parliamentary Research Center, cutting the Civil Service Bureau, and removing NGOs from the consultation boards of civil service contradicts the Serbian way.

Fifth, the Georgian Dream will have to remove all of the suppressive laws that it has adopted since spring 2024, including the laws on foreign agents, LGBT propaganda, and a series of legislative changes criminalizing or fining protests from various perspectives. Ivanishvili seems to be on a completely different track. In fact, on 5 February, his team [announced](#) further changes, targeting media and civil society, cracking down on drug use, and tightening immigration legislation.

The Serbian scenario may be the best way out for the Georgian Dream. This way, they would maintain autocracy and good relations with the EU at the same time. But because of how far Ivanishvili has gone in centralizing power and squashing democracy, this scenario seems to have a low probability at the moment.

Belarus Scenario: Forced Repressions and Complete International Isolation

Under this scenario, the Georgian Dream fully embraces authoritarian rule, suppressing dissent through mass arrests, intimidation, and violence. The state's repressive apparatus would be used to eradicate opposition voices, much like Alexander Lukashenko's regime in Belarus. The civil service and academia will be cleansed, the businesses that support the opposition will be seized or silenced, and critical education institutions will be shut down, or their revenues will be cut. The protesters will be detained, kicked out of the country, or allowed to flee.

The Georgian Dream has now created an investigative commission in the Parliament which will likely be used to demonize the United National Movement and other opposition parties and uncover the "crimes" they have committed, including during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. This process will likely lead to banning the political parties and arresting their leaders, including those who ignore the subpoenas by the investigative commission – a criminal offense by Georgian law. Lukashenko has already achieved this – most opposition leaders are behind bars or out of the country. And this is "their choice" as he famously [quipped](#) back at a BBC journalist in January.

Signs of the Belarus scenario are already visible: the Georgian Dream has already detained over 500 protesters (arrests still continue) and leaked reports indicate that a list of 150 individuals—including journalists, activists, and opposition leaders—is being prepared for their arrest. The squadron of special police is as violent as the Belarusian special forces, and the survival of the regime in both cases depends on brute force.

Similar to Belarus, the protesters in Georgia are mainly from the middle class and the youth, which means that they have not only a lot to lose but also other alternatives in life, including sources of income.

Similar to Belarus, the protesters in Georgia are mainly from the middle class and the youth, which means that they have not only a lot to lose but also other alternatives in life, including sources of income. This means that if the crackdown continues, intensifies, and the regime shows no signs of backing off, many protesters might leave the country (visa-free with the EU is helpful here) or stop protesting to be able to sustain their families.

If this scenario materializes, the international isolation of Georgia will become a *fait accompli*. Lukashenko is already used to this and Ivanishvili is getting used to having no allies in the West. The rhetoric and actions of the Georgian Dream, including the recent [withdrawal](#) from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe after being given temporary conditional credentials, show that detaching from international institutions is not a problem for Ivanishvili. It might be a problem for some in his team but those who are not making the decisions have no say in the strategy.

At the same time, Georgia lacks some critical elements that enabled Belarus to sustain such an isolationist, inward-looking authoritarian system:

Security Forces' Capacity: Lukashenko has complete control over the military and security forces while the Georgian Dream faces internal divisions and doubts within law enforcement ranks. The patrol police are not happy with the brutal crackdowns of the special forces. If the decision is made to become even more ruthless, upscaling to killing its citizens, it is not guaranteed that the historically obedient law enforcement will comply. Georgia,

unlike Belarus, is quite a small country and families are already divided by politics. If the division becomes more profound, it might backfire on the Georgian Dream.

The Georgian Dream, by contrast, does not have guaranteed Russian security assistance and Russian presence on the ground. Indeed, this might change quickly if Russia decides to intervene openly and support Ivanishvili.

Russian Backing: Belarus survived intense international pressure and domestic uprising thanks to Moscow's unwavering support, including financial, military, and political. The Georgian Dream, by contrast, does not have guaranteed Russian security assistance and Russian presence on the ground. Indeed, this might change quickly if Russia decides to intervene openly and support Ivanishvili. However, direct Russian intervention will come with a higher domestic political cost. The Georgian Dream's propaganda is all about preventing Russia from attacking Georgia while continuing with the European integration efforts. If they invite the Russian military, the popular discontent will likely rise, something which could become a tipping point for Ivanishvili's clinging to power.

Legitimacy Crisis: Unlike Belarus, where Lukashenko has ruled for decades, the Georgian Dream's mandate is much weaker. In Belarus, generations have seen or known no other ruler but Batska. In Georgia, the Georgian Dream has only been in power for 12 years and supporters of the previous administration are abundant. The opposition has been receiving 30-40% of votes in every election since 2014 and despite being fragmented and leaderless, the Georgian Dream has never managed to surpass 60% support, even with the loyal Central Election Commission and electoral fraud.

A Belarus scenario would probably suit Ivanishvili and his team. If events develop in a Belarusian way, Georgian Dream leaders will become fully immune to Western pressure and consolidate power. Therefore, if the protests are squashed, the probability of this scenario will be moderately likely.

Venezuela Scenario: a Crisis that Never Fully Ends

In a Venezuelan-style scenario, much like in Belarus, the Georgian Dream consolidates full authoritarian control. However, unlike Belarus, this comes with the added challenge of economic instability and a volatile domestic situation, making long-term regime survival far more uncertain.

Venezuela has become synonymous with authoritarianism, economic collapse, and political repression. As Georgia faces its longest-running protests and deepening political crises, comparisons are beginning to look legitimate. In both cases, democratic backsliding has fueled mass resistance.

Over the past decade, Venezuela has become synonymous with authoritarianism, economic collapse, and political repression. As Georgia faces its longest-running protests and deepening political crises, comparisons are beginning to look legitimate. In both cases, democratic backsliding has fueled mass resistance. In Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro systematically dismantled democratic institutions, undermined elections, and repressed opposition leaders, ensuring that power remained in his hands. The state became a tool for consolidating his rule, with courts, electoral commissions, and military and security forces bending to his will. Georgia has a similar trend. The Georgian Dream has steadily captured key institutions,

weakened the judiciary, and used law enforcement against protesters and civil society activists. The Georgian opposition, however, is still legally active, but the government increasingly relies on legal maneuvers and disinformation to discredit its critics, echoing some of the tactics used in Venezuela. Once Ivanishvili moves to outlaw the opposition and close the media, the only remaining difference will be the economy.

Public resistance in both countries has taken the form of long-running, large-scale protests, though their origins and outcomes differ. Venezuelans took to the streets repeatedly—first in 2014, again in 2017, and then in 2019 and 2024—demanding Maduro’s resignation, free elections, and an end to economic mismanagement. But each wave of demonstrations was met with violent crackdowns, mass arrests, and the militarization of security forces. This scenario is likely in Georgia, too. If the 2024-25 protests are squashed, new protests might reappear, leading to continuous crisis and instability.

Another difference from Venezuela is the role of the military. As we have [explained](#) in the previous issue of *GEOPOLITICS*, the military in Georgia has remained neutral and the police—while used for political repression—have not yet reached the level of systemic brutality seen in Caracas. But this, too, can be easily changed, depending on how the situation evolves.

One significant difference from the Venezuela scenario is the economy. Venezuela’s collapse was driven by years of corruption, hyperinflation, and failed socialist policies, exacerbated by international sanctions. Millions fled the country, seeking refuge in neighboring nations as food shortages and economic despair took hold. Georgia, by contrast, has maintained relative economic stability, although [concerns](#) are growing about the economic downfall, dwindling remittances, foreign investment risks, and potential financial isolation if the

country continues to drift away from the West. While there is no immediate threat of hyperinflation or mass migration, a prolonged estrangement from the EU could weaken Georgia's financial standing and push it further into dependence on Russia and China—just as Venezuela became reliant on Russian and Chinese aid to survive. In Venezuela, oil revenues were enough to sustain the regime and enrich the rulers at the expense of the people. In Georgia, there is no such source of revenue. Yes, Ivanishvili is a billionaire, but if the country plunges into the recession and protests acquire social character, it will be very hard to sustain the regime financially and counter the poor simultaneously.

Perhaps the starkest difference between the two countries lies in how power is contested. In Venezuela, the opposition, led at various points by figures like Juan Guaidó, Maria Machado, or Leopoldo López, attempted to mount a coordinated resistance to Maduro's rule, only to be systematically dismantled by the regime's repression. In Georgia, the protest movement lacks a single leader. Rather than being driven by opposition political parties, it is essentially a grassroots, civil society-led effort. This decentralized nature makes it harder for the government to target individual leaders. Still, it also means the movement lacks a clear political strategy for translating street protests into lasting political change.

The trajectory of both countries also hinges on their geopolitical positioning. Venezuela became a battleground for competing global powers with the United States and the EU backing the opposition while Russia, China, and Iran propped up Maduro's government. Georgia, too, finds itself at a geopolitical crossroads, but its situation is not yet as dire. While the Georgian Dream has increasingly pursued a Russia-friendly course, the West has not fully abandoned the country and its people. However, if Georgia's EU aspirations are permanently derailed and repression continues to escalate,

Western disengagement could accelerate, leaving Georgia vulnerable to more profound Russian influence—just as Venezuela fell into Moscow's orbit.

Georgia is not Venezuela—but the coming months will determine how closely it comes to following a similar path.

For now, Georgia is not Venezuela—but the coming months will determine how closely it comes to following a similar path. This scenario, basically a win of authoritarianism, but with a fragile economy and severe instability, is also moderately likely, granted that the Georgian Dream breaks the will of the protesters.

Armenian Scenario: Successful Protest With a Leader

Amid recent developments in Georgia, some even draw parallels with Armenia's 2018 protests that brought Nikol Pashinyan to power. Indeed, the Georgian and the Armenian protests share some fundamental characteristics. In both cases, the protests involved mass participation from capital cities and regional areas. In both cases, the support from the diaspora was crucial and overwhelming. The Georgian Dream lost the foreign-based electoral precincts, [garnering](#) only 15% of the vote. The protests in both countries mobilized diverse social groups and became nationwide. In both cases, the demonstrations were political rather than purely social and concerned the country's future trajectory.

However, the differences between the Armenian and the Georgian events are far more pronounced, making this scenario less likely to be replicated in Georgia.

The trigger for mass protests in Armenia in 2018 was then President Serzh Sargsyan's decision to extend his rule by becoming Prime Minister after a

decade in power. In contrast, the protests in Georgia were not sparked by the rigged general election of 26 October 2024 but, rather, by the 28 November announcement from Georgian Dream Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze declaring that the country's EU accession process would be postponed until at least 2028. This announcement became a crucial test of whether or not the overwhelming popular support for Georgia's EU integration—sustained for years—was genuine and resilient.

Another key difference is the duration of the protests. In Armenia, the protests lasted around 40 days, were on the rise, and culminated with the change of power; in Georgia, more than 70 days have passed. While the demonstrations continue with no signs of abating, they come with ebbs and flows. Culmination has not occurred yet and is hard to foresee any time soon.

Unlike the Armenian protests, the Georgian movement lacks a prominent leader. It is orchestrated not by opposition political parties but by a diverse coalition of civil society groups.

Most importantly, unlike the Armenian protests, the Georgian movement lacks a prominent leader. It is orchestrated not by opposition political parties but by a diverse coalition of civil society groups.

Furthermore, the government's response diverges significantly. After 40 days of mass protests in Armenia, Sargsyan stepped down, acknowledging his mistake, and the Parliament elected Pashinyan as the Prime Minister. In contrast, the Georgian Dream has shown no willingness to compromise. Parliament is considered illegitimate, and as of 7 February, all opposition MPs have been [stripped](#) of their mandates, bringing down the number of MPs to 101 (from 150). Instead of engaging with the

protesters, the ruling party has either ignored or sought to discredit them, branding demonstrators as “people without a homeland” and accusing them of being part of the so-called “Global War Party” and “Deep State,” implying a conspiracy orchestrated by the West.

Instead of engaging with the protesters, the ruling party has either ignored or sought to discredit them, branding demonstrators as “people without a homeland” and accusing them of being part of the so-called “Global War Party” and “Deep State,” implying a conspiracy orchestrated by the West.

In the Armenian scenario, the opposition and civil society defeated the incumbent. In Georgia, the success of the protest movement, if it happens, will likely take a different course than in Armenia. The differences are too stark; therefore, the leader-led transition is improbable.

Ukraine Scenario: Euromaidan/Eurovolution?

As Georgia's political crisis deepens, comparisons with Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution of 2013–2014 are inevitable. Both movements were driven by a fundamental choice between a European future and increasing alignment with Russia. Both saw governments resisting public demand for EU integration. In both cases, mass protests turned into existential struggles for the country's political future. However, while the parallels are striking, the differences are even more pronounced, making it unlikely—at least for now—that Georgia's protests will follow the Ukrainian trajectory. But if Bidzina Ivanishvili makes the same miscalculations as Viktor Yanukovich, the possibility of a full-scale confrontation cannot be excluded.

The most fundamental distinction between Euromaidan and Georgia's protest movement is the level of organization and resources available to demonstrators.

The most fundamental distinction between Euromaidan and Georgia's protest movement is the level of organization and resources available to demonstrators. In Ukraine, the protesters were not just an organic grassroots movement; they were also backed by wealthy oligarchs, political opposition figures, and even regional elites who saw an opportunity to break from Yanukovich's rule. Financial support flowed into Maidan, funding everything from food supplies to medical aid to makeshift defenses. Volunteers coordinated logistics with military-like efficiency, setting up barricades, self-defense units, and even rudimentary governance structures. In contrast, despite their longevity and resilience, the Georgian protests lack such deep-rooted self-organization and financial backing, save for sporadic crowdfunding of protest activities, the government imposed hefty fines and assistance to the detained demonstrators. What sustains the Georgian protests is a deep-seated public frustration with the Georgian Dream's policies, but not the well-structured resistance that defined Euromaidan.

Another critical difference is that Georgian security forces are vastly more prepared than Ukraine's were in 2014. The infamous Berkut riot police, who attempted to suppress the Euromaidan protests, were poorly coordinated, underfunded, and riddled with internal divisions. When violence escalated, they struggled to maintain control, ultimately resorting to deadly but chaotic force. In Georgia, however, the security apparatus is far more sophisticated. The Georgian Dream's security services—GDD and affiliated law enforcement agencies—are well-trained, well-equipped, and far more disciplined than Berkut ever was.

This is where the true risk of escalation lies. Unlike Ukraine, where state weakness allowed a mass uprising to overpower the government, Georgia's security forces are in a position of strength. However, history has shown that regimes often miscalculate their own control over events. In Ukraine, everything changed when Yanukovich ordered his forces to fire on demonstrators, leading to dozens of deaths. This act of state violence became the tipping point, radicalizing even moderate protesters and ensuring that Yanukovich's rule was no longer tenable. If Ivanishvili were to make the same mistake—if his government resorts to lethal force against civilians—then all current assumptions about the trajectory of Georgia's crisis could be shattered.

That said, there is another key difference that makes a Ukrainian-style escalation less likely: Georgia's political culture has changed since its violent past. In the 1990s, Georgia was a country where political disputes were often settled with bullets rather than ballots, but that era is long gone. The idea of taking up arms is no longer embedded in the political mindset of most Georgians. Unlike Ukrainians in 2014, who had a recent history of armed conflict and an already active paramilitary presence in the east, Georgians do not have the same inclination toward violent resistance. Even if Ivanishvili's government were to intensify repression, it is unlikely that protesters would take up weapons in response. Instead, the more probable outcome would be a mass political awakening rather than an armed insurgency.

Another significant difference between Georgia's crisis and Ukraine's Euromaidan is the scale and sophistication of government propaganda. While Viktor Yanukovich did control state media and tried to discredit the Maidan protests, his propaganda machine was basic as compared to what the Georgian Dream has built over the years. Yanukovich's messaging was often awkward and unpersuasive, relying on outdated Soviet-era narra-

tives and lacking the systematic coordination seen in modern information warfare.

The Georgian Dream operates a highly sophisticated and coordinated propaganda ecosystem, spanning state-controlled media, pro-government TV stations, online disinformation networks, and social media manipulation.

In contrast, the Georgian Dream operates a highly sophisticated and coordinated propaganda ecosystem, spanning state-controlled media, pro-government TV stations, online disinformation networks, and social media manipulation. The ruling party has weaponized smear campaigns, conspiracy theories, and psychological operations to an extent that Yanukovich's administration never achieved. Protesters are painted as "foreign agents," "Western puppets," and "traitors to the homeland," and government-affiliated media work tirelessly to delegitimize the movement. The scale of this propaganda is aimed at domestic audiences and international observers, seeking to frame the protests as a radical, foreign-backed destabilization campaign rather than a genuine expression of public discontent.

Ultimately, while Georgia's crisis may echo Euromaidan in its fundamental political stakes, the structural differences in organization, resources, security forces, and political culture make a direct replication unlikely. However, the lesson from Ukraine remains clear: a government's miscalculation in repressing dissent can turn an unresolved political struggle into an irreversible confrontation. If the Georgian Dream crosses that line, the current movement could transform into something far more consequential than even Ivanishvili anticipates. The key question is whether or not he will realize the limits of his power before it is too late—or if he will follow in Yanukovich's footsteps and gamble his regime on the use of force. The

probability of this scenario is, therefore, impossible to assess without factoring in an unknown variable – Ivanishvili's decision to shoot at his people.

Which One?

We are unable to provide a precise answer to this question. However, the Georgian Dream will likely escalate repression, but full Belarus-style authoritarianism may be beyond its capabilities. Economic deterioration and international pressure could force some tactical concessions but not enough to resolve the crisis entirely. Unless a unifying leader emerges or external forces dramatically shift the situation, Georgia is poised for prolonged political paralysis and uncertainty.

The situation in Georgia will likely unfold in one of two ways: a protracted crisis or an escalation into violent confrontation. The former appears more probable while the latter, though less likely, remains a dangerous possibility.

In the protracted crisis scenario, the protest movement gradually loses momentum as it struggles to achieve a decisive breakthrough. The absence of centralized political leadership, which initially helped sustain the movement's broad-based appeal, eventually became a weakness. The Georgian Dream government continues its strategy of targeted repression, focusing on protesters, journalists, and activists, keeping the movement fragmented and unable to generate sustained pressure. While demonstrations continue in various forms—such as street marches, cyber activism, and occasional strikes—their scale diminishes over time, allowing the Georgian Dream to consolidate its power and become fully dictatorial – probably embracing Venezuelan or Belarusian development models.

Simultaneously, government propaganda will escalate, employing smear campaigns, personal at-

tacks, and the widespread application of the Foreign Agents Law to delegitimize civil society and opposition voices. The Georgian Dream will find more room to maneuver as international attention shifts to other global crises. The ruling party will actively seek closer ties with non-Western actors to compensate for its growing isolation from the West. This could include restoring diplomatic relations with Russia, expanding cooperation within the 3+3 format, or even pursuing membership in BRICS—all moves that would reinforce the Georgian Dream's position among its domestic supporters while strengthening its leverage in future negotiations with the West.

The US is likely to remain distracted by other global priorities. At the same time, the EU and multilateral organizations, such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe (CoE), may choose selective engagement with the Georgian Dream, justifying this as a pragmatic attempt to maintain influence in Georgia rather than pushing it entirely into Russia's sphere. Under these conditions, the next major test will be the local elections where the opposition will face a difficult decision: either boycott the vote as a form of protest or attempt to compete in key cities to challenge the ruling party's dominance. In this scenario, President Salome Zourabichvili could emerge as a unifying figure, assuming leadership in the opposition's efforts to mount a serious challenge to the ruling party.

Whether or not any of these developments occur, one thing will be clear – in this course of events, Bidzina Ivanishvili will have secured an unchallenged grip on power, making Georgia as authoritarian as ever and aligning Georgia's foreign and security policy with those of Russia and China. The rest will be details that history will not remember.

In contrast, the escalation scenario could be triggered by an unpredictable act of repression, a high-profile arrest, or a symbolic moment that reignites mass outrage. If protests regain intensity,

the government may resort to violent suppression using special forces which could provoke retaliation from demonstrators and escalate the standoff into direct confrontation. If tensions spiral out of control, the government may impose a state of emergency to reassert control.

A crisis of this magnitude would place immense pressure on the military, forcing it to either support the government or side with the protesters. The military's decision would ultimately determine the outcome. Unlike in a prolonged crisis scenario, in an escalation, one side emerges as the clear winner while the other is defeated.

A crucial factor in this scenario is the possibility of Russian involvement. Whether or not Moscow intervenes will depend on the situation at the time. If the war in Ukraine has wound down and a ceasefire is in place, Russia may seize the opportunity to support Bidzina Ivanishvili's regime, ensuring Georgia remains under its influence. However, if the Ukrainian saga continues and Russia remains overstretched, its ability to intervene might be limited (like it was in Syria). In that case, the Kremlin may prefer to stay out of Georgia's internal struggle, opting to contain the crisis rather than escalate it into an international conflict.

Although this scenario is less probable than a protracted crisis, it cannot be ruled out entirely. The potential for escalation remains significant, particularly given the Georgian Dream's determination to cling to power at any cost. While some may argue that escalation could take a non-violent form, recent trends suggest that Ivanishvili's regime is unwilling to relinquish control, even in the face of overwhelming public resistance. The coming months will reveal if Georgia slides into a prolonged stagnation or the political confrontation reaches a breaking point.

At this stage, one might ask, whether there is really no way for a peaceful and civilized resolution of

the current stand-off. Sure there is. For that, the oligarch must decide to drop all non-democratic authoritarian instruments and call for new elections. That, unfortunately, is not going to happen. What could happen though, is for Ivanishvili to be pushed to the corner so that he has no other option, but to dispel the tensions with the new election. That tension can only be sustained if three components are present.

First of all, the number of protesters has to increase and the protests need to become more diverse, intensive and disrupting. This would paralyze the response capacity of the Georgian Dream.

Second, the international pressure on Ivanishvili and his political team, through sanctions, travel bans and diplomatic isolation, needs to tip the scales in favor of the concessions. So far, this is in the making but a lot more can be done, especially by individual EU member states.

And finally, the economic stagnation, or a perception of thereof, will be key in making Ivanishvili to concede. With continuous internal and external pressure, if an economic downturn brings out socially vulnerable and poor, Ivanishvili will have no other choice but to concede ■

The Roots of Georgia's Political Crisis

Georgia's current political crisis can be analyzed through many lenses, as this journal has done on many occasions. However, to fully grasp the root causes of the crisis, one must examine Georgia's journey toward state-building. This journey is also a story of an interplay of historical legacies, external influences, and internal challenges.

The absence of independent and authoritative bodies capable of addressing a crisis of this magnitude clearly indicates the fundamental shortcomings of Georgia's socio-political fabric.

Georgia's political crisis, caused by the [rigged](#) parliamentary elections, [detour](#) from the Western path, and subsequent protests, has made it evident that no single institution, actor, or authority in the country can take the lead and restore the processes to the constitutional and political framework. The absence of independent and authoritative

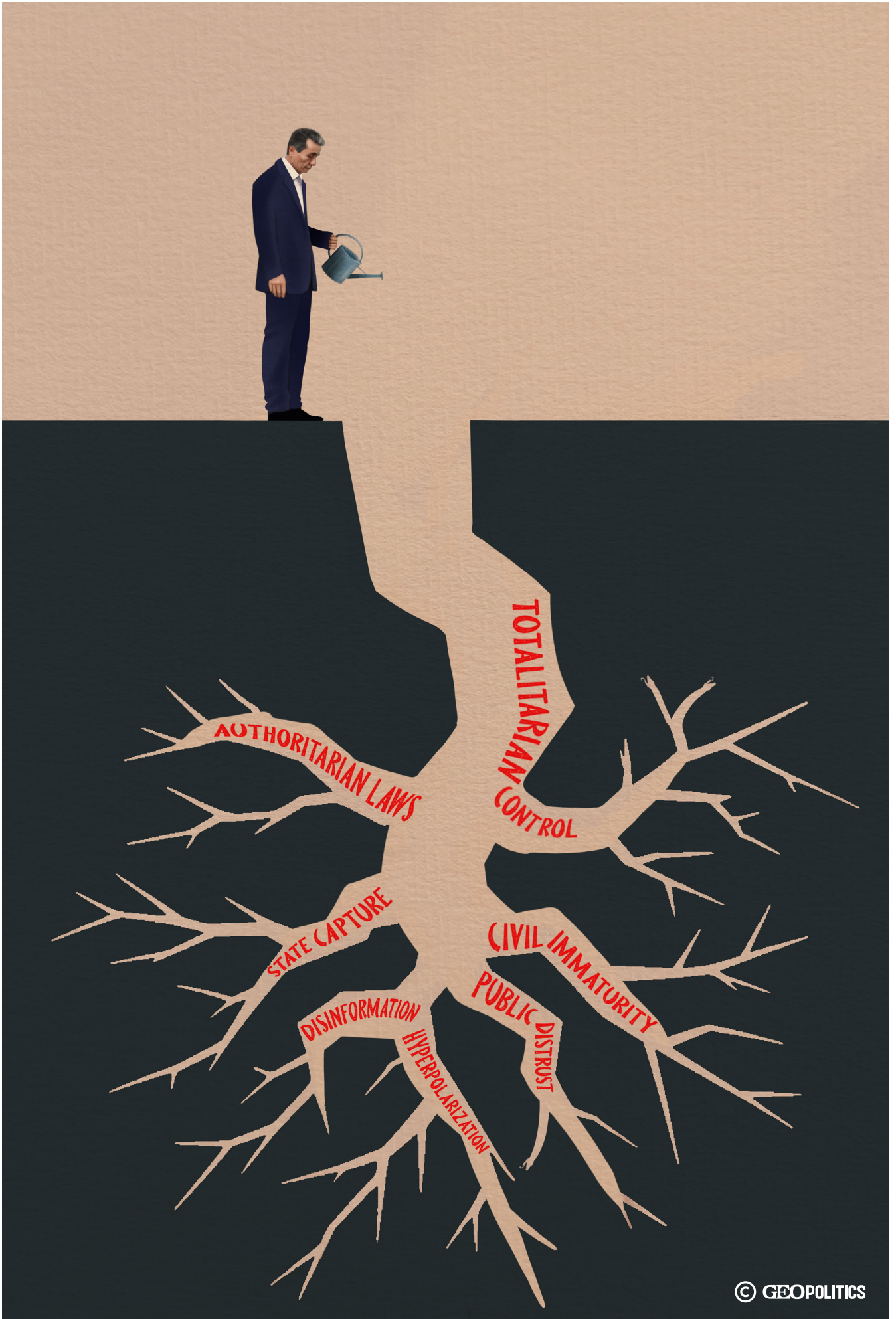
bodies capable of addressing a crisis of this magnitude clearly indicates the fundamental shortcomings of Georgia's socio-political fabric.

In contrast to Georgia's case, presidential elections in Romania also sparked turmoil but marked a remarkable [example](#) of an effective outcome after the intervention from the Constitutional Court. The first round, held on 24 November 2024, saw independent nationalist candidate Călin Georgescu and center-right politician Elena Lasconi as the leading contenders. However, Georgescu's unexpected announcement led to the Constitutional Court annulling the election due to substantial interference by a Russian influence operation in social media, confirmed by declassified intelligence. In contrast to the case of Georgia, the turmoil was effectively addressed, avoiding the national security crisis with new elections being ordered, highlighting the importance of an independent court and state institutions in maintaining stability and the integrity of constitutional political processes.



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In Serbia, the discontent with the increasingly authoritarian rule of Vučić has culminated in hundreds of thousand-strong rallies in Belgrade and elsewhere after the collapse of the train station's concrete roof in Novi Sad – a likely outcome of corruption and misspending. The Prime Minister's [resignation](#) in response to the public outcry and a declaration by Vučić that holding new elections is seriously considered also showcase that a sense of public accountability in Serbia, despite the authoritarian trend, is a lot more developed than in Georgia – once again a result of a different social fabric and state-building trajectory.

Foundational Problems of State-Building

The lingering effects of 70 years of Soviet totalitarian rule have left a profound impact on Georgia's institutions and mindsets. Centralized control and suppression of dissent during the Soviet era discouraged civic engagement and fueled distrust in political behavior and activities. This legacy continues to influence the political landscape, where centralized decision-making and a lack of independent institutions remain prevalent. The Soviet past has created a political culture where power is concentrated, and dissent is rarely accepted, making it difficult to foster a truly democratic environment. Power-sharing in such a system is taboo and shows weakness – what politicians should avoid at all costs.

Building governance structures and democratic norms from scratch was a significant hurdle for Georgia in the early 2000s. The country's lack of historical experience with democratic self-rule has resulted in persistent problems consolidating democracy and strengthening democratic institutions. As a result, the weak independent institutions and bureaucracy have operated as an [extension](#) of the ruling regimes. The inexperience in statecraft has hampered the development of effective governance and democratic practices.

Through hybrid warfare tactics, disinformation campaigns, and territorial threats, Russia has sought to undermine Georgia's sovereignty and democratic progress.

Russia, meanwhile, has [spared no effort](#) to destabilize Georgia's state-building and democracy for decades. Through hybrid warfare tactics, disinformation campaigns, and territorial threats, Russia has sought to undermine Georgia's sovereignty and democratic progress. These actions created a challenging environment for Georgia's state-building efforts as the country had to navigate external threats while striving to build democratic institutions.

Three major sociopolitical obstacles—political culture, civic immaturity, and a hyperpolarized communication space—serve as critical barriers to progress.

Foundational issues in Georgia's state-building lay the groundwork for [understanding](#) the more profound, interconnected challenges that continue to hinder the country's democratic consolidation. Three major sociopolitical obstacles—political culture, civic immaturity, and a hyperpolarized communication space—serve as critical barriers to progress. Together, these challenges perpetuate cycles of distrust, weaken democratic institutions, and impede meaningful societal and political engagement.

Political Culture

Political culture, or the absence thereof, is one of the most critical factors in Georgia's state-building. The perception of politics in Georgia is often negative, with politics seen as an “ugly” profession reserved for indecent individuals. Political activity

is frequently reduced to part-time participation or debate shows, with limited focus on actionable policy-making. As power-sharing and the division of responsibilities are not happening, the ruling party is perceived as the sole actor responsible for governance. In contrast, opposition parties are seen as critics without specific roles or responsibilities. This dynamic creates a political environment where meaningful engagement and policy development are stifled, and the opposition struggles to present itself as a viable alternative.

Furthermore, the absence of a healthy political process in the country fosters an environment where politics is viewed only as a sustainable career path for the ruling parties. As a result, politics in Georgia becomes a short-term opportunity to exploit power and resources rather than a platform for public service. This dynamic allows the ruling party to [dominate](#) all resources and control most financial means available in politics, further weakening opposition parties and their ability to build strong organizational structures.

Political succession and a peaceful power transfer—essential components of a responsible and accountable political cycle—are rare exceptions. Without a political system that ensures long-term stability or financial viability, individuals rarely see politics as a profession capable of providing for their families. Most of those involved in politics have their day jobs or businesses as their primary occupation, leaving them limited time and space for political activities. Consequently, the political landscape is characterized by stagnation, opportunism, and a lack of genuine democratic competition.

The most significant byproduct of this dysfunctional political culture is the emergence of one-party politics and the “winner takes it all” political mindset.

The most significant byproduct of this dys-

functional political culture is the emergence of one-party politics and the “winner takes it all” political mindset. The ruling party effectively controls all branches of power and strategic resources in the country. This creates a feedback loop in which opposition parties cannot significantly challenge the ruling regime. Over time, unchallenged regimes become spoiled by their dominance, unwilling to share power. This, in turn, creates a situation where these regimes have no experience or chance to influence politics from the opposition, further perpetuating a cycle of power hoarding and democratic stagnation. The lack of political competition and accountability erodes the democratic foundation of the country, leaving Georgia’s state-building efforts perpetually stalled.

Civic Immaturity

The psychological impact of Soviet totalitarian rule has fostered distrust and clan-like thinking among generations of Georgians.

Civic immaturity further complicates the political landscape. The psychological impact of Soviet totalitarian rule has fostered distrust and clan-like thinking among generations of Georgians. There is no collaboration tradition without kinship or personal relationships driving the agenda. This civic immaturity hinders the development of a cohesive and engaged civil society which is so crucial for democratic state-building. The legacy of distrust and individualism makes it difficult for citizens to unite around common goals and work together for the greater good.

Generations of Georgians lived under a Soviet system designed to cultivate distrust among people, pitting them against each other by forcing individuals to spy and report to the special services. Refusing to collaborate was punished brutally, often leading to imprisonment, forced displacement,

or even a death sentence. The lingering collective PTSD from this experience continues to stand in the way of building mutual trust and collective activism, even among those who share common values or interests. This severely undermines society's ability to mobilize and drive change through organized, grassroots-driven demands. For example, Georgia has no established culture of professional groupings, such as trade unions advocating for improvements in their respective fields. The lack of trust and collective action leaves the public largely fragmented and disengaged, further weakening the foundations of democratic development.

Georgia's lack of decentralized political activity is a striking example of how socio-political challenges intertwine.

Georgia's lack of decentralized political activity is a striking example of how socio-political challenges intertwine. The combination of shortcomings in political culture and civic immaturity has resulted in a political landscape where policymaking at the regional and local levels is almost non-existent. Politicians in the regions are rarely perceived as genuine advocates for their communities' interests. Instead, they are often viewed as enforcers of the ruling party's agenda, facilitators of electoral victories, and controllers of local resources. This stifles content-based politics and prevents a bottom-up approach that could foster meaningful political engagement in the regions. The relationship between the central ruling elite and local politicians often mirrors a mutually reinforcing mafia structure where central figures appoint "captains" to manage the peripheries, ensuring loyalty and extracting "revenue shares" in return for their empowerment. This top-down, patron-client dynamic leaves little room for genuine grassroots political activity or the development of independent local leadership, further entrenching Georgia's challenges in consolidating democracy.

Hyperpolarized Communication Space

Adding to these challenges is the hyperpolarized communication space. Media polarization in Georgia is stark, with outlets divided into clear pro-government and opposition factions. This [creates](#) "echo chambers" where political sides can comfortably propagate unchallenged narratives. Georgia exemplifies the phenomenon of post-fact politics, where facts hold little weight, and public dialogue is reduced to entrenched narratives. In this context, political actors speak only to their constituents, creating a reality where plausible deniability is unlimited. Politicians and media outlets can deny even verifiable facts and convince their audiences of alternative truths with little to no opportunity to reach or influence those in other echo chambers.

The Georgian Dream (GD) fosters this hyperpolarization by refusing to participate in debates or appear on opposition channels while simultaneously banning opposition voices from government-controlled media. Government-backed channels are better resourced and have a wider national reach, amplifying this imbalance. The ruling party leverages this advantage to promote strong party propaganda, further [consolidating](#) its political power.

This dynamic creates an uneven playing field in Georgia's media landscape, where opposition voices struggle to gain traction, and balanced debate is virtually non-existent. The lack of equitable access to media platforms stifles meaningful dialogue and deepens the divide between political factions, eroding democratic norms. The absence of cross-communication between factions further entrenches polarization and hampers efforts to build a unified national narrative. Opposition media often fails to hold opposition parties accountable for specific actions or inaction, fostering

complacency and impacting public discourse and democratic accountability. Meanwhile, government-controlled channels are strictly aligned in a coordinated propaganda effort, reinforcing the ruling party's narrative and amplifying its dominance.

The challenges of political culture, civic immaturity, and media polarization are deeply interconnected. Distrust and polarization create barriers to collective action and governance reforms. For instance, the negative perception of politics discourages civic engagement while media polarization reinforces existing biases and prevents meaningful dialogue. This interconnectedness perpetuates a vicious cycle where each issue exacerbates the others, making democratic progress increasingly difficult. A holistic approach is necessary to address these systemic issues, focusing on rebuilding trust, encouraging balanced media practices, and fostering civic responsibility to support Georgia's state-building and democratic consolidation.

Light at the End of the Tunnel?

Despite these challenges, there are signs of progress. The parliamentary elections in October 2024 triggered a survival instinct within Georgia's opposition, leading to a reinvigorated and more diverse political landscape. Two months of mass [protests](#) in the streets of Tbilisi showcased an unprecedented level of civic engagement and grassroots-driven activism, signaling steps toward greater political and social maturity.

In the run-up and aftermath of the 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia, there have been encouraging signs of improvement in the country's political culture. One significant development has been the genuine diversification of the opposition. Over the past decade, the Georgian Dream has employed a strategy of demonizing its primary ri-

val, the United National Movement (UNM), and its leaders, including ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili, through arrests, political persecution, and physical assaults. These tactics inevitably led to the fragmentation of the UNM, as various political offshoots sought to distance themselves from the party and appeal to a broader base of voters. Although earlier breakaways, such as *European Georgia* and *Strategy the Builder*, failed to secure substantive support, they began shifting toward a more diverse opposition landscape.

By 2024, this diversification had evolved significantly, offering Georgian voters a range of political choices that transcended the historically binary competition between the Georgian Dream and the UNM. For the first time, voters could choose from four distinct political centers, including the *Coalition for Change*, *Lelo*, and *For Georgia*. Despite the Georgian Dream's efforts to label all opposition as a "collective UNM" and intimidate voters, the opposition managed to take baby steps towards presenting itself as a credible [alternative](#) to one-party rule.

Another sign of progress is the opposition's ability to project readiness to break the devastating practice of one-party rule. For the first time, opposition parties signaled willingness and ability to collaborate and share power in a coalition government, challenging the entrenched winner-takes-all dynamic of Georgian politics. This shift represents a significant step toward fostering a culture of political pluralism, accountability, and shared responsibility. The diversification and maturity displayed by the opposition provide hope that Georgia can move away from its history of centralized power and authoritarian tendencies, laying the groundwork for a more democratic and inclusive political environment.

The maturing of civil society and activism is also observable, contributing to the more optimistic outlook of Georgia's future. Even the modest ad-

vancements in political culture and opposition dynamics have triggered significant changes toward greater civic maturity. Since October 2024, we have witnessed a different and innovative approach to public protests. Departing from the traditional mass rallies in front of the Parliament building—where opposition leaders took turns making political declarations—the new wave of demonstrations is characterized by its decentralized, grassroots-driven nature. These [movements](#) are no longer monolithic or solely orchestrated by political parties; instead, they are driven by the genuine grievances of various segments of Georgian society.

Recent examples of people uniting around shared interests and values beyond personal loyalties offer hope for Georgia's democratic future. Professional groups such as doctors, teachers, IT specialists, business representatives, and even acting and former civil servants have been consistently and vocally demanding free and fair elections, as well as the release of their peers who were arrested during protests. These groups are mobilizing not as extensions of political parties but as independent actors advocating for issues that directly affect the future orientation of society as a whole.

A citizen movement, [Daitove](#), is an example of civic maturity. A grassroots initiative to support citizens traveling to Tbilisi from the regions to participate in anti-Russian protests initially focused on providing accommodation by connecting people willing to open their homes to protesters. The Facebook group quickly evolved into a multifaceted platform for mutual aid. It facilitated first aid, food, transportation, childcare, and the delivery of essential supplies while organizing fundraising efforts to procure and distribute protest materials. Beyond logistical support, *Daitove* fostered solidarity and collaboration among diverse groups, creating a powerful example of civic maturity and grassroots activism.

Recent protests have broken free from the constraints of traditional centralized activism.

Additionally, recent protests have broken free from the constraints of traditional centralized activism. Instead of concentrating in a single location, protests now co-occur across multiple sites in Tbilisi, other cities, and even rural regions. This decentralized nature has made it increasingly difficult for authorities to contain or suppress dissent using the standard authoritarian measures that the Georgian government has honed over the years.

Perhaps the most transformative development is the active involvement of the Gen Z generation in the demonstrations. Georgian youth have started recognizing its pivotal role and responsibility in shaping the country's present and future. Their growing engagement appears to be an antidote to the post-totalitarian traumas of distrust and ambivalence that have long plagued Georgian society. With fresh perspectives and a willingness to challenge entrenched norms, this new generation is driving a cultural shift prioritizing accountability, transparency, and inclusivity. Unlike many similar movements in the West, in Georgia's case, the youth participation is less ideologized, without a clear left-wing or right-wing agenda.

While some encouraging signs of change have been observed in Georgia's political culture and civic maturity, the hyperpolarized communication space remains a significant obstacle to democratic consolidation. Government-controlled channels continue to strictly follow the regime's propaganda, amplifying narratives that support the ruling party while dismissing or discrediting opposing voices. Conversely, opposition media outlets remain focused primarily on critiquing the government, offering extensive coverage of its alleged wrongdoings.

It must be acknowledged that the opposition media's heroic non-stop coverage of the two months of protests has played a crucial role in sustaining public opposition to the regime. Despite facing continuous financial crises, the TV channels Mtvvari, Pirveli, and Formula have consistently provided visibility to the protests, broadcasting the grievances of various societal groups and maintaining public pressure on the government.

A small, albeit short-lived, positive development has been the impact of sustained mass protests and public pressure on one of the key pillars of government propaganda: the public broadcaster. For a short time, the public broadcaster granted protest representatives an hour of daily airtime. However, since January 2025, this access was revoked, a prominent critical TV anchor was dismissed, and the station swiftly reverted to a pro-Georgian Dream editorial stance. This illustrated the urgent need for substantial reform of the GPB; otherwise, any concessions will be nothing more than temporary cosmetic changes.

Can the Society Cash In?

Georgia indeed has the potential for transformative change; however, the persistence of entrenched challenges, such as hyperpolarized communication, political culture deficiencies, and lingering authoritarian practices, makes momentum very fragile and explosive.

Georgia can now either capitalize on its society's strong determination for a democratic and European future or risk plunging into the abyss of authoritarian rule. The joint article in this issue outlines those possible paths in front of the country. Georgia indeed has the potential for transformative change; however, the persistence

of entrenched challenges, such as hyperpolarized communication, political culture deficiencies, and lingering authoritarian practices, makes momentum very fragile and explosive.

At this turning point, it is imperative for Georgia's political opposition, civil society, and strategic international partners to fully recognize their acute roles in ensuring that the nation's democratic aspirations succeed. To prevent regression into autocracy, these stakeholders must consolidate their efforts into an articulated and coordinated strategy to secure free and fair elections and the integrity of future elections. This strategy must prioritize:

- **Unity and Coordination:** Opposition parties, civil society groups, and grassroots leaders need to overcome internal divisions and work collaboratively toward shared democratic objectives. Unity among these actors will amplify their influence and legitimacy.
- **Grassroots Engagement:** Civic actors need to continue fostering decentralized, inclusive movements that empower citizens to demand accountability and participate in shaping their country's future.
- **Media Reforms:** Addressing media polarization is essential to fostering a more informed and engaged public. Promoting unifying national narratives and ensuring fair access to platforms for all voices will be critical to breaking the echo chambers that perpetuate division.
- **International Advocacy and Support:** Strategic partners, including the EU, the UK, the US, and other democratic allies, need to continue pressing the Georgian Dream regime to hold new elections while providing material and moral support to civil society and independent institutions. Recent decisions of the Trump administration to cripple USAID and demonize foreign assistance are not helpful.

The determination of Georgian society, evidenced by recent protests and the growing involvement of younger generations, is a powerful force for change. However, it must be channeled effectively to ensure lasting reforms. At this breaking point,

Georgia has a unique opportunity to overcome its systemic challenges and achieve a democratic breakthrough. The stakes are monumental—not just for Georgia but as a test case for the endurance of democracy in the region ■

The Georgian Dream's Isolationist, Damaging, and Minimalist Foreign Policy

Since late 2024, the Georgian Dream (GD) has pursued a foreign policy that can best be described as self-isolationist, damaging, and minimalist. Its primary objective is not to promote Georgia's national interests and ensure its security, stability, and prosperity, as prescribed by the now-defunct Foreign Policy Strategy or National Security Concept, but to preserve the regime and consolidate its foreign legitimacy. Seeking recognition is a new concept that puts Georgia back 30 years. In the early 1990s, in the short period of time from the declaration of independence in 1991 to the joining of the UN in 1992, Georgian foreign policy was all about seeking recognition – but at that time for the newly re-established independent state. This time, it is about the recognition of the regime.

Internal and External Legitimacy Problems

The Georgian Dream regime is grappling with a profound internal legitimacy crisis, highlighted by nearly three months of continuous protests against its derailment of Georgia's European integration. Citizens have persistently mobilized, demanding new elections, the release of political prisoners, and a long-term transition to an accountable and transparent coalition government rooted in European values. Instead of addressing these demands, the government has responded with escalating repression, further widening the divide between the ruling elite and the Georgian people.



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Externally, Georgia's legitimacy is just as precarious. Key partnerships with Western allies have been suspended or severely strained, leaving the country increasingly isolated. No Western government has acknowledged the Georgian Dream's election victory, nor has any leader sent a congratulatory message to Mikheil Kavelashvili, the former footballer handpicked by Ivanishvili as Georgia's next president. His inauguration occurred without foreign dignitaries, including ambassadors—a stark sign of diplomatic disengagement. In a desperate attempt to fabricate legitimacy, the Georgian Dream touted a routine “holiday greetings” [letter](#) from NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte as a sign of recognition. However, NATO swiftly [clarified](#) that the message was a standard bureaucratic courtesy with no political significance, further exposing the government's growing isolation on the international stage.

The Georgian Dream also attempted to use the January visit of Council of Europe Secretary

General Alain Berset as a stamp of legitimacy. A high-ranking party official even [declared](#) that “talks on legitimacy will not continue any longer since the Secretary General of the Council of Europe is meeting with the Georgian Prime Minister.” However, Berset swiftly [clarified](#) that his visit had nothing to do with recognizing the legitimacy of Georgia's parliamentary elections. Similarly, the ruling party sought to exploit the planned visit of OSCE PA Chairwoman Pia Kauma, hoping to use it as another diplomatic endorsement. Instead, Kauma postponed her trip, [stating](#) that she would visit Georgia “at a time when OSCE PA engagement would be most effective”—a clear rebuke signaling concern over the country's political trajectory.

The scale of electoral fraud in the parliamentary elections led several Western European nations to openly question the legitimacy of the Georgian Dream's rule. Nordic and Baltic Foreign Ministers urged the government to “consider the possibility of new elections,” while their counterparts from

France, Germany, and Poland echoed similar concerns, emphasizing the need to address the “possibility of new elections.” These statements marked an unprecedented diplomatic challenge to the Georgian Dream’s authority, further isolating the regime on the international stage and reinforcing the growing perception that its grip on power lacks democratic legitimacy.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) took an even stronger stance, directly challenging the Georgian Dream’s legitimacy. In a resolution [adopted](#) on 29 January 2025, by an overwhelming vote of 114-13, PACE conditionally ratified the credentials of the Georgian Dream delegation while demanding an end to police brutality and human rights abuses, the release of political prisoners, and the creation of an electoral environment conducive to genuinely democratic new parliamentary elections “to be announced in the coming months.” The resolution dealt a serious blow to the Georgian Dream’s international standing, so much so that the Georgian delegation [withdrew](#) from PACE altogether—aligning Georgia with the likes of Belarus, Russia, and Azerbaijan, all of which, at various times, lost their place in the Assembly due to authoritarian practices.

No high-level bilateral visits have taken place between Georgia and Western nations, further isolating the regime and reinforcing its growing detachment from the international democratic community.

The Georgian Dream’s external legitimacy crisis is further underscored by its exclusion from key international forums. Party leaders were not invited to the Munich Security Conference and absent from the Davos International Forum—events where global leaders shape diplomatic and eco-

nomic strategies. Meanwhile, ambassadors from EU member states and the United States have refrained from holding official meetings with Georgian Dream government representatives, signaling a diplomatic freeze. Additionally, no high-level bilateral visits have taken place between Georgia and Western nations, further isolating the regime and reinforcing its growing detachment from the international democratic community.

At the presidential level, diplomatic engagement has been non-existent. Mikheil Kavelashvili has neither met nor engaged with any foreign dignitaries, and it is unlikely he would have much to contribute if he did. The international response to his inauguration further illustrates Georgia’s diplomatic isolation. No Western leader extended congratulations while Lithuania’s President [explicitly backed](#) Salome Zourabichvili as the only legitimate head of state, stating that Kavelashvili was “only elected and acknowledged by his own party.” Similarly, the Chairman of the German Bundestag’s Foreign Affairs Committee [warned](#) that “no one should recognize the so-called new ‘President’ of Georgia or legitimize him through invitations or visits,” reinforcing the growing consensus that Kavelashvili’s presidency lacks international credibility.

Nonetheless, Kavelashvili was not entirely without recognition. Hungarian President Tamás Sulyok and Russian Duma Foreign Committee Chairman Leonid Slutsky were among the few who extended their congratulations. Slutsky, in particular, took to Telegram to insist that Kavelashvili had lawfully assumed office, ridiculing Salome Zourabichvili’s defiance. In a dismissive remark, he [quipped](#) that legitimacy “is not a lady’s handbag you can carry,” a crude attempt to diminish the international rejection of Georgia’s new leadership while echoing Moscow’s narrative of the Georgian Dream’s uninterrupted rule.

Low Hanging Diplomacy

To counter its growing isolation from the West, the Georgian Dream has ramped up “handshake diplomacy” with regional states that place little emphasis on human rights and democratic values.

Foreign Minister Maka Botchorishvili has met with ambassadors from Azerbaijan, China, the UAE, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. She has also held calls and meetings with her counterparts from Hungary, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Kazakhstan. During her participation in the OSCE Ministerial on 4-5 December 2024, she managed to have bilateral meetings only with officials from Armenia, Slovakia, Austria, Finland (the OSCE Chair), and Azerbaijan—highlighting the limited diplomatic space available to the Georgian government.

Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze has similarly prioritized visits to Azerbaijan, the UAE, Armenia, and Kazakhstan, implicitly showing that high-level engagements with Western leaders remain out of reach.

These diplomatic interactions serve only one primary function: to manufacture an illusion of international legitimacy.

These diplomatic interactions serve only one primary function: to manufacture an illusion of international legitimacy. The Georgian Dream’s propaganda machine, led by Imedi TV, PosTV, Rustavi 2, and the Georgian Public Broadcaster, eagerly promotes these meetings as proof that Georgia is conducting “business as usual” on the world stage—despite mounting evidence to the contrary.

We must mention that Botchorishvili did actually manage to meet some European ambassadors, but they were either from Georgian Dream’s allies—

Slovakia and Hungary—or from EU states with right-leaning governments. The only notable exceptions were the UK and EU ambassadors. However, the EU envoy [clarified](#) that his meeting with Botchorishvili was purely “diplomatic dialogue” and “not linked to recognition,” emphasizing that the detention of protesters was a key topic of discussion.

The question of the non-recognition of the Georgian government is becoming increasingly significant in Brussels and across the EU capitals. Some EU officials remain hesitant to take definitive action against Kavelashvili or Georgian authorities, instead opting to delay and sidestep the issue. According to Rikard Jozwiak, [the prevailing attitude](#) is a “classic EU limbo” where most member states maintain only technical engagement with Tbilisi, avoiding any move that could be interpreted as legitimizing the government.

The Georgian MFA’s dwindling presence on social media reflects this diplomatic stagnation. Its official X account posted only four tweets in February, 17 in January, and 18 in December—almost all documenting meetings with foreign dignitaries, while offering no statements, foreign policy positions, or assessments.

Perhaps the most significant blow to the Georgian Dream’s recognition is to be expected from the US Congress. On 9 January 2025, US Helsinki Commission Chairman Joe Wilson (R-SC) and Ranking Member Steve Cohen (D-TN) introduced the *Georgian Nightmare Non-Recognition Act*. This legislation would prohibit the United States from recognizing Ivanishvili’s regime and affirm Salome Zourabichvili as Georgia’s legitimate president until free and fair elections take place.

Strategic Partnerships in Ruins

Georgia’s increasing authoritarianism and anti-Western shift have led to the collapse of its stra-

tegic partnerships with all major allies.

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The United States has effectively [halted](#) its Strategic Partnership Charter with Georgia—a framework established in January 2009 as a bipartisan commitment to strengthening ties following the 2008 Russian invasion. The charter facilitated regular high-level Strategic Partnership Commission meetings alongside four bilateral working groups focused on democracy, defense and security, economic and energy issues, and cultural exchanges. While these meetings had already become irregular since 2020—an early sign of deteriorating relations—now, the partnership is all but defunct.

The United Kingdom preemptively [suspended](#) the Wardrop Dialogue in October 2024—two weeks before Georgia's parliamentary elections—citing concerns over “democratic backsliding and anti-Western rhetoric.” Sweden followed suit in January by [severing](#) ties with its Parliamentary Friendship Group with Georgia while Baltic, Nordic, and Eastern European EU members have similarly frozen inter-parliamentary relations. The EU-Georgia parliamentary dialogue had already been suspended long before, rendering the European Integration Committee of Georgia's Parliament functionally irrelevant.

Overall, the Georgian Dream's parliamentary diplomacy has hit its lowest point since independence. Its withdrawal from PACE, expulsion from the Party of European Socialists in 2022, and relentless European Parliament resolutions condemning its authoritarian drift have left the Georgian Parliament politically isolated and diplomatically irrelevant.

In addition, the imposition of targeted sanctions, as outlined in detail elsewhere in this issue, leave Georgian authorities completely ostracized. If before the bilateral agenda with the US, UK, the EU, and other partners was about strengthening bilateral ties and promoting Georgia's strategic goals, now it is all about arguing that the sanctions must be removed. In such circumstances, room for pushing Georgia's national interests has shrunk to the minimum.

Institutional Collapse of Georgia's Foreign Service

While the Parliament formally sets Georgia's foreign policy, its execution falls to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which is now facing one of its most severe institutional crises. The November-December protests against Georgia's foreign policy shift triggered an unprecedented backlash within the diplomatic corps—over 160 diplomats voiced their dissent, and four ambassadors resigned.

The Georgian Dream's response was a crackdown on the foreign service. Order № 01-74, issued by Maka Botchorishvili, effectively placed the diplomatic corps under direct political control. The decree, which contradicts the Law on Diplomatic Service, extended administrative contracts to high-ranking diplomats, allowing their dismissal based on political criteria and making their tenure dependent on the minister's term. This politicization of diplomacy was [criticized](#) by the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) as a tool for purging dissenting voices from state institutions, particularly after Georgia's EU accession process was suspended. Watchdogs have linked this move to a broader wave of repression against civil servants, with dozens reportedly dismissed for pro-EU views. The order also violates past Constitutional Court rulings by allowing contract ter-

minations with just one month's notice, undermining the professional stability and impartiality of Georgia's foreign service. Several diplomats have been fired, or their postings have been suspended, in a demonstration to sow fear among those who oppose Georgia's foreign policy shift.

Beyond legal and institutional damage, the MFA is also paralyzed by unfilled ambassadorial posts in key Western capitals, including Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, the UK, and the United States. These vacancies are expected to be filled by party loyalists—a practice already evident in recent appointments where ambassadors to the UK, the Council of Europe, the US, Mexico, and other key postings were handed to Georgian Dream insiders, party figures, or affiliated businessmen. With the MFA now a politicized extension of the ruling party, Georgia's diplomatic credibility and ability to engage internationally are rapidly deteriorating.

Even if these ambassadorial posts are eventually packed by Kavelashvili, the larger question remains—will Western countries grant *agrément* to these appointees? While outright rejection of diplomatic credentials is an exceptionally rare and hostile act, delaying the process is a well-established diplomatic practice used to signal disapproval. Ironically, the Georgian Dream has played this card before—in 2018, the party blocked Trump's nominee, Bridget Brink (now the US Ambassador to Ukraine), citing her alleged pro-Saakashvili stance, as [reported](#) by *Foreign Policy*.

If the US and European states decide to return the favor by stalling *agrément*s for the Georgian Dream's envoys, the country's diplomatic service will be left in further disarray. With key Western capitals already lacking Georgian ambassadors, such a move would reinforce Georgia's diplomatic isolation, leaving its embassies in critical locations either leaderless or represented by acting officials

with limited authority. If Western nations take this route, the damage to Georgia's foreign policy influence and international credibility will be profound, further reducing the Georgian Dream's ability to engage with its traditional allies.

A Paralyzed Foreign Policy Agenda

Instead of positioning Georgia as a proactive player, the regime has effectively sidelined the country from critical international discussions, weakening its geopolitical standing at a pivotal moment.

The consequence of the Georgian Dream's minimalist and self-sabotaging diplomacy is a total disregard for national security interests and a failure to seize the strategic opportunities arising from the rapidly shifting global order. Instead of positioning Georgia as a proactive player, the regime has effectively sidelined the country from critical international discussions, weakening its geopolitical standing at a pivotal moment. Ivanishvili has indeed delivered on one of his pre-2012 promises – Georgia is no longer a part of the “disagreement” between Russia and the West.

European Integration: A Betrayed Goal

Rather than focusing on negotiating the opening and closing of EU accession treaty chapters, Georgia's diplomatic corps will now likely be tasked with lobbying for the removal of targeted sanctions against Georgian Dream leaders.

Georgia has squandered its chance for fast-track European integration, a historic opportunity that emerged from the war in Ukraine. This journal

has extensively covered how the EU opened the door for Eastern Partnership countries to accelerate their accession process. However, by failing to meet EU conditions, prioritizing party interests over national ones, and dismantling institutional foreign policymaking in favor of party-controlled diplomacy, Georgia has reversed its European trajectory. The 28 November decision to suspend EU integration efforts marks the official betrayal of its longstanding pro-European aspirations. Rather than focusing on negotiating the opening and closing of EU accession treaty chapters, Georgia's diplomatic corps will now likely be tasked with lobbying for the removal of targeted sanctions against Georgian Dream leaders and disseminating government propaganda in Brussels and other Western capitals. This might be good for the party interests, but has nothing to do with Georgian peoples' aspirations.

NATO: A Fading Priority

Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration has also vanished from the diplomatic agenda. No meaningful efforts are being made to advance NATO accession nor is the government engaging in defense cooperation that would strengthen ties with the Alliance. Participation in NATO exercises and forums has drastically diminished and invitations to high-profile NATO events—including summits—have either been rescinded or never extended in the first place. The statements by Georgian Dream leaders that the war in Ukraine started because of NATO and that Georgia should seek permission from Moscow before it joins NATO effectively killed Georgia's chances of achieving NATO membership. However, as the Ukrainian membership of NATO spirals back into the international agenda, Georgia's absence at the table can be a severe blow to the long-standing goal of joining NATO.

European Security: Missing from Critical Talks

As discussions on a US-led Ukraine-Russia peace

framework gain momentum, Georgia is absent from the equation. A durable European security architecture cannot exclude Georgia and Moldova as leaving Russian influence unchecked in the region will create a dangerous power vacuum that Moscow will exploit immediately. Any credible security guarantees for Ukraine—whether through NATO membership, bilateral security assurances, or other defense arrangements—should logically include Georgia. However, the Georgian Dream is making no effort to position Georgia within this framework.

The days when Euro-Atlantic security and arms control talks were deadlocked over Georgia's unresolved territorial conflicts are over. When these discussions resume (as they inevitably will), Georgia will have lost its rightful place at the table, sidelined by a regime that has willingly abandoned the country's strategic interests.

Russia: A One-Sided Relationship with No Returns

Despite adopting a pro-Russian foreign policy, importing Russian repressive laws, amplifying Kremlin-backed anti-Western narratives, and even turning Russian foreign information manipulation (FIMI) into a domestic disinformation tool (DIMI), the Georgian Dream has gained nothing of substance from Moscow. While Tbilisi has severed ties with Ukraine, assisted Russia in sanction circumvention, and alienated Western partners, Moscow's only reciprocation has been the resumption of direct flights and the removal of visa requirements for Georgian citizens. No progress has been made on de-occupation or territorial integrity, proving that Georgia's loyalty to Russia is a one-way street. Yet, Tbilisi still has more to offer Moscow, including potentially joining the 3+3 format, a Russia-Türkiye-Iran initiative designed to exclude Western influence from South Caucasus affairs. This would be a geopolitical win for Moscow and a further step toward Georgia's strategic isolation.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia: No Gains, Just Losses

Most strikingly, the Georgian Dream has failed to achieve even the smallest progress with the de facto authorities in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. If Georgia were indeed transitioning into a full-fledged Russian client state, one might expect at least some benefits in these breakaway regions—such as restoring partial freedom of movement, expanding trade, or reviving dormant mechanisms like the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs). However, none of this has materialized, and without Western backing, no progress is likely. The rational strategic approach to Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be to activate the “European magnet”—offering local residents access to EU education, free movement, and economic benefits—but this requires Georgia to remain committed to European integration. By abandoning its EU path, the Georgian Dream has lost its strongest “leverage” over these regions.

Furthermore, Georgia’s longstanding non-recognition policy regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia relied heavily on personal relationships between Georgian and Western leaders, ensuring that third-world countries under Russian influence would resist diplomatic pressure to recognize the breakaway regions. Now that Georgia has severed these ties, who will continue the diplomatic fight to prevent further recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

Geneva International Discussions: A Long-Standing Standstill

The Geneva International Discussions (GID)—a format established after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war—will soon hold its 63rd round. No progress has been made in years, as Russia’s stance on Georgia’s territorial integrity remains unchanged. However, the Georgian Dream’s own legitimacy crisis raises an additional complication: Will the US and EU

representatives still engage with Georgian Dream diplomats in Geneva?

The Geneva International Discussions (GID)—a format established after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war—will soon hold its 63rd round. No progress has been made in years, as Russia’s stance on Georgia’s territorial integrity remains unchanged.

Moreover, when the Georgian representative speaks in Geneva on the topics of occupation, illegal Russian military presence, and the violation of the 12 August cease-fire agreement (if he still does, of course), do other participants feel that he is really representing the Georgian Dream whose talking points are exactly opposite? And if the Georgian delegation repeats the same narrative that the ruling party is pursuing (the West is evil, it wants to drag Georgia into a war with Russia, it was Ukraine and NATO’s fault that the 2022 invasion happened), then what is there to even debate in Geneva? Effectively, the Georgian delegation will have to subscribe to the Russian message box, sign a non-use of force agreement, and abandon any effort to push its national interests.

Since 2022, Western reluctance to interact with Russian diplomats has already limited engagement in Geneva. Now, with the Georgian Dream facing Western non-recognition, the same dilemma could apply to Georgian representatives. If the EU’s co-chair visits Georgia, will she have a mandate to meet with the GD Prime Minister Kobakhidze, or will he be treated as a political outcast? As the Georgian Dream’s isolation deepens, even the last remaining international forums where Georgia had influence may become dysfunctional. If we add to these questions perennial GID dilemmas, like, when and where to hold the next meeting and what should be the status of the participants, the Geneva stalemate will become even harder to break.

2008 War: Hijacked Narrative Favoring Russia

The establishment of a parliamentary investigative commission to study alleged crimes of the former United National Movement (UNM) government, particularly its handling of the 2008 war, represents a dangerous shift in Georgia's official stance on its own history and international law. The commission's expected conclusion—that the Georgian government was responsible for starting the 2008 war—will fundamentally weaken Georgia's legal and diplomatic position regarding its territorial integrity. If the ruling Georgian Dream party formally adopts this narrative, it will directly contradict the internationally recognized view that Russia bears primary responsibility for the conflict. Such an admission would serve Moscow's interests, providing Russia with ammunition to justify its continued occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia while legitimizing its claims that Georgia forfeited its sovereignty over these regions by initiating aggression.

The consequences of this shift will be severe and Georgian diplomacy, even if attempting to reverse it, will fail. Georgia has spent the past 15 years carefully building an international legal argument that Abkhazia and South Ossetia do not qualify as independent states under international law. By reframing the 2008 war as an act of Georgian aggression rather than a Russian invasion, this commission risks undoing the legal and diplomatic groundwork that has prevented broader recognition of the occupied regions. The implications will extend beyond historical interpretation—this narrative will likely be used in international courts, diplomatic discussions, and future peace negotiations to argue that Georgia itself created the conditions for the territories' separation. Countries previously reluctant to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia may now find themselves with a more convenient justification for doing so, shifting the burden of responsibility onto Tbilisi. Additionally, Georgia's

credibility within international organizations such as the UN, OSCE, and the Council of Europe will be eroded, making it significantly harder to advocate for its territorial integrity in multilateral forums. Effectively, this investigation will serve as a geopolitical gift to Russia, reinforcing its occupation of Georgian territories while stripping Tbilisi of its most powerful legal defense.

China: The Dangerous Option

As Western support fades and sanctions loom, the Georgian Dream will increasingly turn to China for economic survival—a decision that could have devastating consequences on two fronts.

As Western support fades and sanctions loom, the Georgian Dream will increasingly turn to China for economic survival—a decision that could have devastating consequences on two fronts. This will have far-reaching repercussions for Georgian diplomacy.

First, deepening ties with China will lock Georgia into dependence on another authoritarian power, much like its growing reliance on Russia. With Western financial aid suspended and access to EU and US markets at risk, Georgia will be forced to seek Chinese investment. Beijing's state-backed financial institutions will likely become a key source of capital, particularly for large-scale projects like the Anaklia deep-sea port. While this may provide short-term relief, history has shown that China's economic partnerships often lead to debt dependency. Countries like Montenegro and Sri Lanka have found themselves unable to repay massive Chinese loans, forcing them to cede critical infrastructure to Beijing. If Georgia follows the same path, it could lose control over strategic assets like ports, energy infrastructure, and key industries, undermining its economic sovereignty.

Second, this shift will severely damage Georgia's international reputation. Historically, Georgia has been seen as a rare pro-Western stronghold in an authoritarian neighborhood. Moving closer to China will erode this image, alienating US and EU policymakers who once championed Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The 2019 Georgia-China strategic partnership declaration was an early sign of growing ties, but today, the relationship is no longer about balanced cooperation—it is about survival.

Georgia will soon find itself neither fully embraced by the West nor entirely trusted by its new authoritarian patrons. Beijing, like Moscow, does not offer partnerships without strings attached. As Tbilisi distances itself from Brussels and Washington, it risks becoming an international outcast—caught between two spheres of influence, yet fully belonging to neither.

Alternative Safeguards for Georgia's Foreign Policy

As Georgia faces diplomatic isolation under the Georgian Dream, alternative actors are stepping in to preserve the country's foreign policy priorities. President Salome Zourabichvili, widely respected abroad and viewed as the legitimate voice of the Georgian people, plays a key role in keeping Geor-

gia's national interests on the international agenda. Alongside her, pro-Western opposition parties and civil society groups, including a network of former diplomats, are actively engaging with foreign partners to counterbalance the government's anti-Western trajectory.

Zourabichvili's participation in high-level conferences and events, like the Munich Security Conference, provides a crucial platform to reaffirm Georgia's commitment to Western integration, advocate for stronger security ties, and ensure that any Ukraine peace settlement does not sideline Georgia's territorial and security concerns. Meanwhile, opposition parties have already taken diplomatic initiatives that the Georgian Dream has avoided, such as [reaching out](#) to Syria's new leadership to push for a reversal of its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia - efforts the ruling party has neglected to avoid provoking Moscow.

Beyond these diplomatic moves, these alternative actors can also help shape EU engagement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, in general, contribute to European and American understanding of how new security architecture should also include Georgia. In the absence of foreign policy leadership from the ruling party and stifled institutional diplomatic service, this unconventional approach may be the only way to protect Georgia's long-term national interests ■

NEED FOR SPEED

Political Disruptors and Disrupted Politics

In recent years, the term “disruption” has become ubiquitous in the political lexicon. Originally popularized in the business world by Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen’s [theory of disruptive innovation](#), it has now penetrated the realm of modern politics. Every significant industrial revolution has been a form of disruption, and political systems have inevitably felt the impact. As new economic and social realities emerge, so do new political classes and movements eager to address the challenges and opportunities presented by these upheavals. If we truly live in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, we should not be surprised that disruption has eventually reached politics as well.

Originally associated with innovative startups revolutionizing industries, disruption has come to symbolize a broader societal transformation impacting various domains, including the economy, art, technology, and now politics. In this context, disruption refers to the willingness and ability to challenge established norms, break away from tra-

ditional practices, and create significant change. This concept has gained traction as political landscapes around the globe undergo transformative shifts, often driven by leaders who position themselves as outsiders determined to upend the status quo.

The recent trend of political disruption is perhaps most evident in the rise of populist leaders and movements across the globe.

The recent trend of political disruption is perhaps most evident in the rise of populist leaders and movements across the globe. In this regard, the primary and perhaps most consequential leader to focus on is Donald Trump.

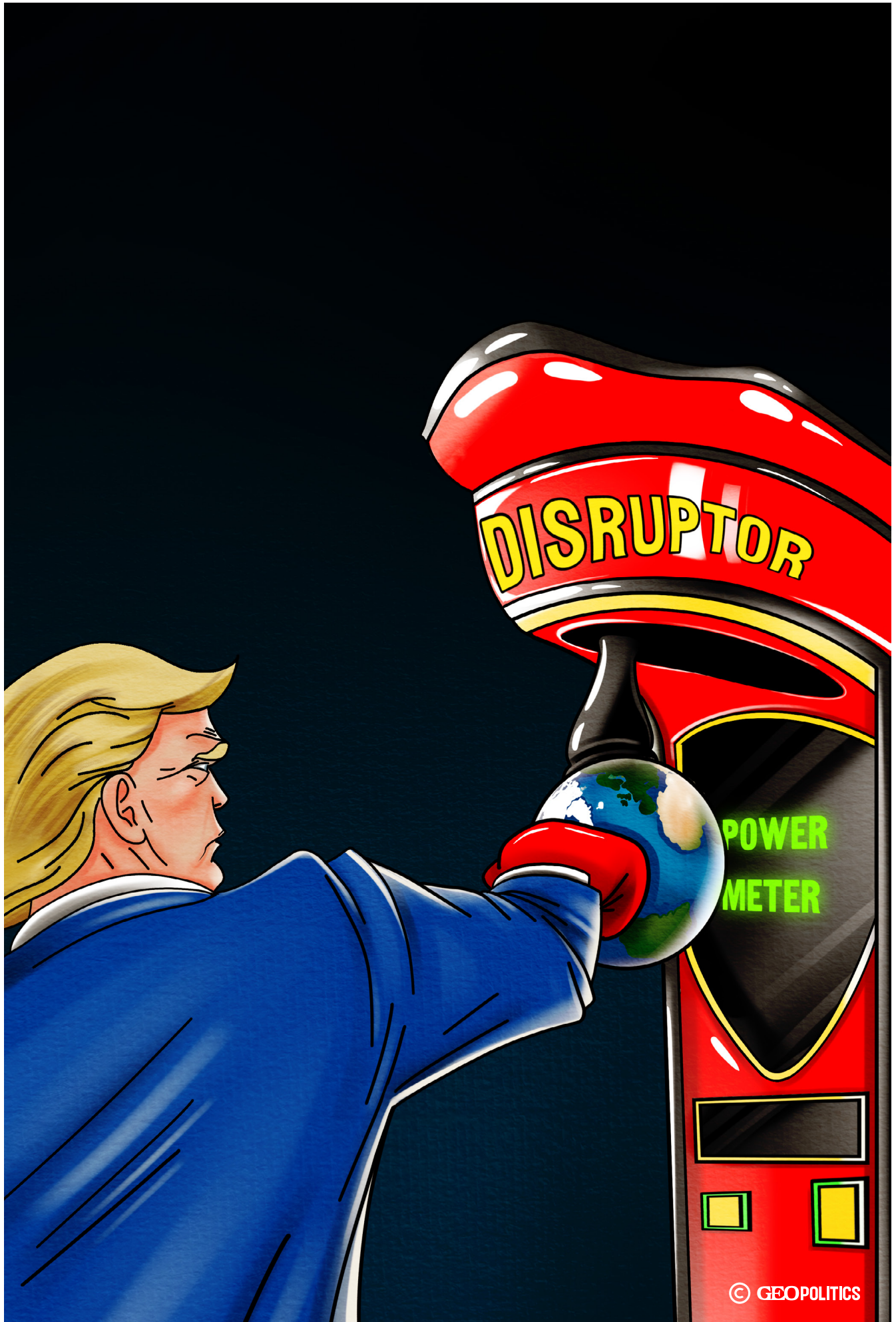
Disruptor-in-Chief

The administration of Donald Trump is one of the most prominent examples of political disruption in



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recent history. Trump, a businessman with no prior political experience, campaigned on a platform of dismantling the existing political order and implementing radical change. His slogan, “Make America Great Again,” resonated with many voters who felt disillusioned by traditional political processes and were eager for a departure from conventional leadership.

Based on previous White House and business experience, Trump seems to strongly believe that governing institutions in their current forms are not only ineffective but dangerous for the successful implementation of his agenda due to their high penetration by cadres with woke, DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion), and progressive mindsets. Therefore, in his conviction, executive agencies need a fundamental overhaul, not only structurally but also in terms of personnel.

Essentially, many of Trump’s key appointments resemble “wrecking balls,” individuals with the mission to disrupt existing institutions. This phase of disruption is intended to be followed by a second phase focused on rebuilding.

At first glance, it is evident that Trump’s nominations for senior roles consist of individuals with a clear agenda and the capability to act as disruptors. Simultaneously, economic disruptors who have transitioned into political influencers, like Elon Musk and others, are being granted access to government institutions through the creation of an ad hoc agency called the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Essentially, many of Trump’s key appointments resemble “wrecking balls,” individuals with the mission to disrupt existing institutions. This phase of [disruption is intended](#) to be followed by a second phase focused on rebuilding.

Is There an Agenda Behind Disruption?

Disruption, while often unsettling, can also be a catalyst for positive change. The key lies in whether or not the disruptors have a coherent vision and strategy that extends beyond the initial shockwaves. Sustainable transformation requires a clear understanding of end goals and the pathways to achieve them. In politics, this means crafting policies that not only challenge outdated systems but also build resilient structures capable of addressing the complexities of the modern world.

So far, external observers—domestic or international, comprising politicians, experts, or media—are greatly confused and disturbed, unable to discern a comprehensive agenda in the actions of the new administration. Everyone is either trying to guess or play a catch-up game.

In the pre-election period, much of the media and political punditry were fixated on the Heritage Foundation, likely due to its significant influence during Trump’s first presidency and its notorious [“Project 2025”](#). This project aimed to shape the future of American governance with a bold conservative agenda. However, while the spotlight shone brightly on the Heritage Foundation, another influential player was quietly working behind the scenes. The America First Policy Institute, operating with little fanfare, [meticulously studied](#), examined, and mapped the lessons of previous administrations. They scrutinized publicly available budgets, policies, and the leadership of various federal agencies, crafting a concrete plan of action for the incoming administration. This comprehensive approach was designed to ensure that disruption would not just be a fleeting phenomenon but would lead to sustainable and effective governance.

However, the question remains: Can these ambitious plans withstand Trump's impulsive nature and translate into coherent, effective, and productive policies? Trump's leadership style's inherent unpredictability poses a significant challenge to any structured and strategic approach.

New World Disorder?

Disrupting the Globe: Turbulence is felt not only inside the US but around the world as well. Friends and foes alike are on high alert. It appears we are witnessing, if not the emergence of a new world order, at least the destruction of the previous one.

The instruments of US foreign policy—whether the Department of State, Department of Defense, or USAID—are undergoing profound changes.

The instruments of US foreign policy—whether the Department of State, Department of Defense, or USAID—are undergoing profound changes. The activities of USAID, in particular, are not only paralyzed, but the whole institution may disappear altogether by merging with the Department of State. Even just halting USAID programs for 90 days will surely entail disruption, not only to the somewhat stable lives of its employees and contractors but also to millions of people on the recipient side.

Negative EU outcry over the Greenland-related rhetoric and suspicions over whether the US is planning to mistreat its closest allies also contribute to the disruption of the existing world order, in which the West stuck together.

New Tariff Wars, which might (or not) start with Mexico, Canada, and the EU, have prompted discussions about whether the three should convene

a Summit to counter US steps. Negative EU outcry over the Greenland-related rhetoric and suspicions over whether the US is planning to mistreat its closest allies also contribute to the disruption of the existing world order, in which the West stuck together.

The United States' international reputation is facing serious challenges. Its rivals now see a shift from weakness to excessive force, yet, ironically, this has unsettled allies more than enemies. However, a quick glance at already taken actions reveals signs about Trump's foreign policy priorities and tactics.

China Challenge: Harassing allies seems to have a not-so-hidden agenda or primary target—China. It was clear from the beginning that the reason for pressuring Canada and Mexico on tariffs was China's undeclared “fentanyl war” (named after the Opium War) and the illegal immigration problem. The [avoidance](#) of declared 25% tariffs in both cases was possible due to preliminary agreements on boosting border security by various means to prevent the smuggling of fentanyl and illegal immigrants—not goods or services.

The same is true of Panama, where the main target was also China's increasing economic influence. Even in the case of Greenland, China's shadow is highly visible—Greenland represents an alternative source of rare metals (China is currently the largest supplier of these) and is crucial in the emerging competition for Arctic navigation. From this perspective, it should not be surprising that Trump recently linked the rare earth issue with ending the war in Ukraine.

Non-State Solution: The contours of a possible Middle East policy have started to emerge. It is interesting that the “global aid blackout” [excluded](#) Israel and Egypt while the US withdrew from financing the UNRWA (UN's Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East). During a press conference following his meeting

with Netanyahu, Trump's vision for resolving the Palestinian issue took a surprising turn—[resettling](#) the Gaza population in other (presumably Muslim) countries and taking the troubled enclave under some form of US protectorate. The issue of Palestinian refugees has long been exploited by various actors as a gateway into the region for their own not-so-benign interests, leading only to further radicalization and misery among Palestinian Arabs. If this issue finds a permanent resolution, the Middle East could undergo drastic changes. Several statements from Trump himself already indicate that Iran is next in line, although this issue will require further consultations with Arab countries—not a good news for Iran's current government.

“War and Peace”: The self-imposed short deadline to stop war in Ukraine remains one of the most closely watched aspects of Trump's foreign policy promises. So far, there has been more speculation and theorizing—ranging from “gloomy and doomy” to “impossible and prolonged”—than concentrated efforts in this direction. Meanwhile, various statements, interviews, and “leaked” information from the Russian side increasingly resemble ritual dances before an uncertain and unpredictable confrontation with Trump. At the same time, China and India have [drastically reduced](#) their procurement of Russian oil and grain—both significant sources of income for the heavily sanctioned and isolated country which is desperate for cash and technology to continue its war of attrition. Trump, for his part, is dangling the possibility of dialogue in front of Putin—something Russia greatly desires—but without setting a concrete date or engaging in serious preparatory discussions. Contrary to the fears of Ukraine's supporters and the dashed hopes of Russia, military equipment and ammunition [continue to flow](#) from the US to Kyiv. So far, Ukraine's position is neither “under the bus” nor “under the rug” and actually exhibits signs of preparing Russia for a bitter pill to swallow.

If there is a coherent policy behind these actions, even if the methodology is controversial, then in

the best-case scenario (which might actually be a realistic one), shaking allies while targeting enemies could be part of a greater plan—one in which the primary adversary is clearly China and its “minions,” including Russia, North Korea, Iran, and others.

What is clear, however, is that the previous “order” was unsustainable, and a US-led global disruption is in full swing.

So far, too little time has passed to determine whether or not we are witnessing a new world order and what shape it might take. What is clear, however, is that the previous “order” was unsustainable, and a US-led global disruption is in full swing. Yes, these actions have already yielded quick results, but their mid- and long-term consequences remain unpredictable. Key questions include how sustainable these results will be and what unintended consequences may arise. It is evident that Trump is not shying away from irritating allies while keeping enemies in target—thereby weeding out the tools that adversaries might use to undermine his forthcoming actions against them.

From Trump to Georgia: a Generation of Disruptors

Just as globalization touched most of the world's population and countries (with very few exceptions, like North Korea), political disruption is likely to have the same effect. Like technological innovations that disrupt the status quo, while outdated and doomed industries desperately try to cling to old ways, today's Georgia is undergoing a similar transformation.

The incumbent (and highly illegitimate) Georgian Dream regime is essentially trying to swim against the current, dragging the country and its population back to a feudal era while the younger gen-

eration aspires to embrace the fruits of the 21st century. A colleague and friend, a seasoned Georgian politician from the early days of Georgia's independence, shared an interesting observation from the ongoing massive and continuous rallies in Georgia. He recalled the faces, outfits, behavior, and vocabulary of protesters from our time and found a staggering difference between them and today's protesters.

While Trump builds a team of individual disruptors around himself, in Georgia, we are witnessing a whole generation of disruptors taking to the streets, united by the idea of transformative change, demanding justice, democracy, and Georgia's Western path.

While Trump builds a team of individual disruptors around himself, in Georgia, we are witnessing a whole generation of disruptors taking to the streets, united by the idea of transformative change, demanding justice, democracy, and Georgia's Western path. This new generation is delightful, colorful, articulate, and cheerful, unburdened by years of Soviet subjugation. They do not understand nor tolerate an imposed oppressive oligarchic regime. They cherish their freedom of choice and consider themselves part of the West, showing fundamental incompatibility with a totalitarian style of governance.

The current Georgian political regime, ostracized by the West, is blatantly lying to its remaining supporters and the general population by trying to portray itself as an ideological ally of Trump. In reality, they naturally gravitate toward and embrace Chinese, Iranian, and Russian regimes, essentially dragging Georgia into the influence sphere of Trump's declared foes. If some countries, like Belarus or Azerbaijan, can sustain their development models for a while, Georgia cannot.

Unlike Belarus, Georgians have already tasted many of the fruits of democracy and do not want to live under an authoritarian and oppressive regime. Unlike Azerbaijan, Georgia has no oil or gas to achieve economic stability without external investment. Neither does Georgia have enough military might to restore territorial integrity through force. More oppression is not going to make Georgia stable or Georgians obedient.

Political disruption, including in Georgia, is an irreversible trajectory, and attempts by outdated political regimes to remain in power through oppression will eventually lead to a popular revolution. If the Trump administration pays closer and timely attention to places like Georgia, regime change will happen sooner and bloodlessly. Otherwise, the Georgian regime is doomed to face a horrible end for creating endless horror ■

Borderlands Redux: Are Türkiye and Russia Reprising the “Frenemies” Competition?

Beset by the acute crisis of its government’s legitimacy, Georgia is drifting without a rudder during the sea change of international politics bound to reshape the power dynamics in the South Caucasus. Russia and Türkiye, historical “frenemies,” are reprising their late 19th and early 20th-century joust in Syria and West Africa. It devastated the region’s peoples and ruined both the Russian and Ottoman empires back then. Tbilisi and the European powers could be well advised to pay close attention.

Anarchy is What States Make of It

The re-election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, according to some scholars, [marks](#) the formal end of the hegemonic world order. What comes after can be understood as a return of oligopolist state competition rather than simply “multipolarity,” [argues](#) French historian Arnaud Orain.

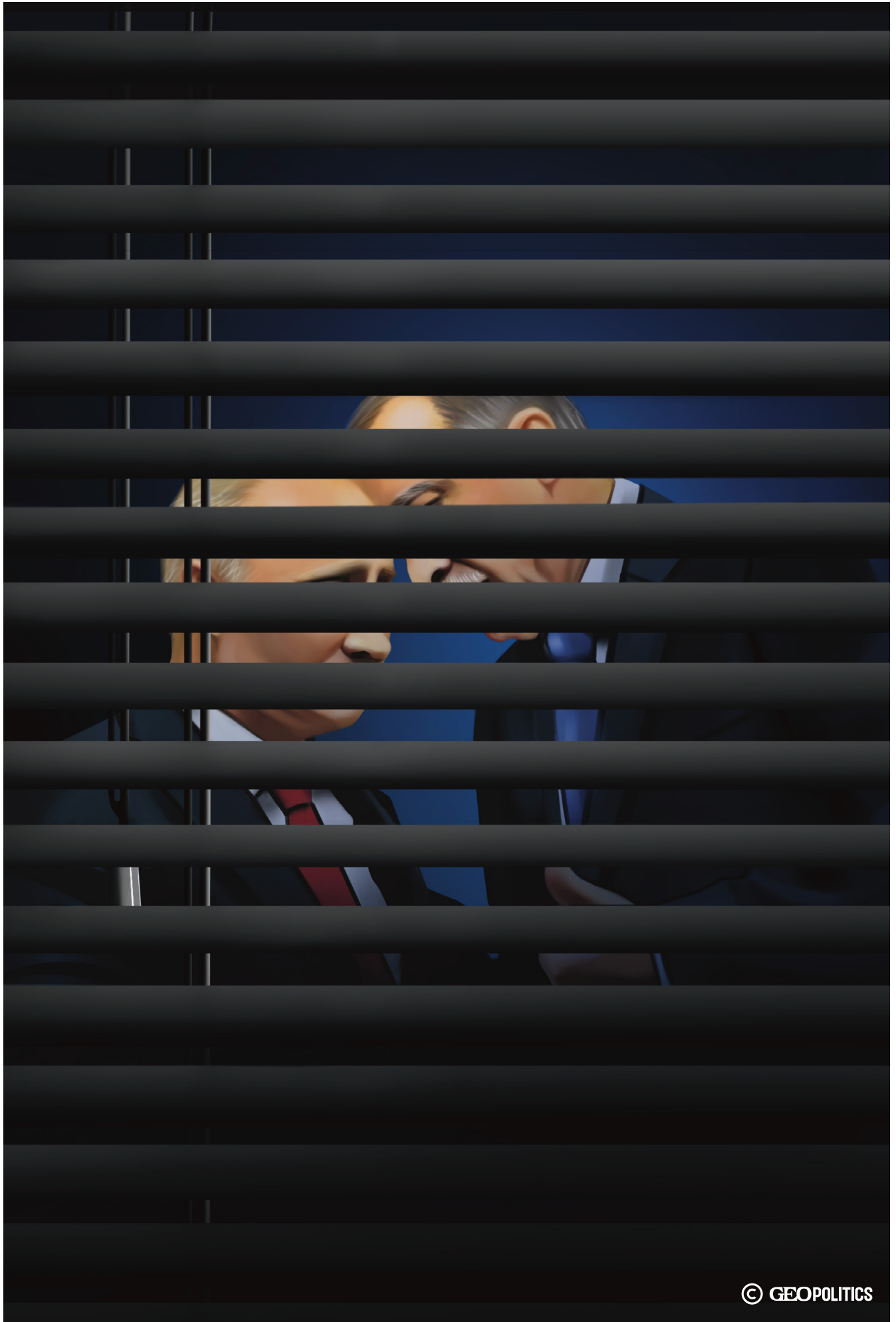
In this system, the powers with global ambition – the US and China – are competing economically within their areas of dominant influence over trade routes, much like Portugal and the Netherlands did in the 15th and 16th centuries or as in the 18th and early 19th century US replaying the Monroe Doctrine as America First, but this time to keep China out of the southern hemisphere. In this view, the Amazon trade platform, as well as platforms that trade in information such as the GAFAs and Elon Musk’s X for the US and TikTok for China, play the role of the modern-day West Indies Trading Company – a commercial enterprise backed by and enmeshed into state power.

As realist political scientists have long [argued](#), the behavior of individual states is defined by systems that influence the relations between the individual states and affect their calculus and power calculations. This is especially true in the non-hegemonic orders, characterized by a lesser normative pull and a higher degree of anarchy. How states re-



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spond to anarchy, however, is historically and culturally contingent, or as Alexander Wendt [wrote](#), “anarchy is what states make of it” – that is, competition and rivalry are not the only natural responses.

Make the South Caucasus Unsafe Again?

This brings us to the South Caucasus, a region of strategic significance bridging Europe and Asia, a site of contestation for influence and power, especially when anarchy in the world order prevails. In the early 19th and, particularly, the early 20th century, the relationship between the Russian and the Ottoman Empires shaped the region’s geopolitical dynamics, notably from the rise of the Young Turks to the outbreak of World War I. The borderland between the two empires was not only an area of mutual competition, as Michael A. Reynolds has demonstrated in his [captivating book](#), *Shattering Empires*. It was a complex interdependency where the competition for influence over the emerging nations, which are ethnically and religiously related, coexisted with a shared interest in keeping extra-regional actors out.

Today, this historical pattern resonates. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [recently said](#), driven by hubris of success in Syria: “Every incident that has occurred in our region, especially in Syria, reminds us of this fact: Türkiye is bigger than Türkiye [...] it cannot limit its horizons to its current surface area” and cannot “escape or hide from its destiny.”

Equally messianic, the Kremlin is keen to keep outsiders out. In the recent Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which Moscow signed with Tehran in January 2025, the parties [pledged](#) to “counter interference of third parties in the internal and external affairs of the Contracting Parties.”

True, on paper, the Kremlin’s relationship with Ankara is far from the level offered to Tehran. Yet, their interdependence is sufficiently strong to have averted open animosity in the most challenging times. Erdoğan and Putin kept things from escalating during serious incidents like Türkiye’s shooting down of a Russian fighter plane over Syria in November 2015 and the murder of the Russian Ambassador by a Turkish policeman in December of the same year.

The Black Sea basin re-emerged as the “borderlands” area where Moscow and Ankara are engaged in reprising their *tango mortal*. The potency of this confrontation is gradually amplified by the erosion of the rules-based order (to which both capitals have contributed) and the disengagement of the US and EU as promoters of the rule of law, regional stability, free trade, and conflict resolution.

The recent years, starting in the autumn of 2020, saw Türkiye militarily backing Azerbaijan to gradually restore its territorial integrity and solidify its position as a dominant sub-regional power – at the expense of Russia’s longtime client – Armenia. On the surface, this was a great loss of face for Moscow, which treated the South Caucasus as its backyard and where, for almost two centuries, no army other than its own had been able to conduct military operations. But complexities of dynamic relationships hide beneath the surface.

Türkiye took special care not to humiliate Russia and provide it with face-saving solutions and profitable exits. After the 2020 escalation around Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia kept the military foothold and a potentially critical role in deciding the region’s future – something it could not capitalize on after invading Ukraine, leading to Azerbaijan forces assuming full control over the breakaway region in September 2023.

In the meantime, Russia has also forged closer ties

with Baku. In addition to political support and extensive trade, Azerbaijan became Moscow's key ally in keeping European influence out of the region. Most notably, Azerbaijan and Russian spies seem to have worked together to [foment and exploit strife](#) in distant New Caledonia against France, Armenia's newfound political and military ally.

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The Regional Chessboard

Similar dynamics of competition and cooperation also play out in a wider region. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Ankara militarily supported the embattled Kyiv from the get-go and closed the straits to Russian naval reinforcements, helping ensure Ukraine did not succumb to military onslaught. But politically, it remained "non-binary," as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank, [put it](#).

Türkiye, the sole NATO member not to join either the US or the EU sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, emerged as the largest exporter of Russian oil and gas via *Turk Stream* and *Blue Stream*, the key energy link between Moscow and the EU, supplying such countries as Hungary, Slovakia and, until recently, Austria.

Russia's sinking into the Ukraine quagmire benefited Ankara economically – it gave Russian citizens a place [to go on vacation](#), where 22 million were reported to have visited in 2022 alone, and sold citizenship for a hefty EUR 400 thousand through a citizenship-by-investment scheme. Türkiye also did not mind establishing a string of small and medium enterprises that re-export sanctioned goods to Russian consumers. In the meantime, Russia's state-owned Rosatom got much-needed cash,

having completed Türkiye's first nuclear power plant in Mersin, on the Mediterranean coast.

Erdoğan's masterful foreign policy tradesmanship was displayed with a lasting saga of the Russian-made S-400 anti-aircraft systems. The purchase in 2017 helped soften Moscow and dismayed NATO when Türkiye was at loggerheads with Greece and France over exploring the continental shelf. The US shut the doors to Türkiye's participation in the F-35 program in 2021. But having weathered the storms, Ankara returned, [repaid](#) foreign exchange-strapped Moscow for the system, and made up with the West by the end of 2024. For this slow-playing bargain, it got back to the F-35 program, acquired the capacity to refurbish F-16 jets domestically, and is on track to build its domestic fifth-generation jet, KAAN. As in previous cases, Türkiye profited, but Russia also got part of what it wanted.

Broadly speaking, Ankara seems to have an upper hand in its wider jousting with Russia. Nowhere is it more evident than in Syria. Erdoğan bet against Bashar al-Assad's regime 13 years before its fall. And while the relations with the force that eventually toppled the bloody regime – Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham (HTC) – have been somewhat tense, Erdoğan clearly emerged in a much better power position than its regional rivals – Russia and Iran. And while Russia is compelled to evacuate its naval base in Tartus, Türkiye [expands the stakes](#) in Syria's reconstruction.

On the African continent, where Russia has worked the ground to oust Western powers through military force, Türkiye is also playing its own game. By the end of 2024, Erdoğan scored a significant victory in the Horn of Africa by [mediating a deal](#) between Ethiopia and Somalia – its key African foothold – on access to the ocean. This mediation [opens](#) for Türkiye's unimpeded access to explore Somalia's continental shelf for hydrocarbons. On top of the 2022 deal with Tripoli, this sets the

foundations for diversifying Türkiye's supplies further away from Azerbaijan and Russia. There are [burgeoning security relations](#) with the junta in Niger, building, once again, on the ground softened by the Kremlin's Wagner mercenaries.

The Turkish bid to join the Russia-inspired and China-dominated BRICS seems like a play for a bargaining position between Washington, DC, Brussels, and Beijing rather than a consequential choice of alliance.

In this context, the Turkish bid to join the Russia-inspired and China-dominated BRICS [seems like](#) a play for a bargaining position between Washington, DC, Brussels, and Beijing rather than a consequential choice of alliance.

Where Does It Leave Georgia?

As the Georgian Dream (GD) turns its back to the European Union and the United States ponders exiting regional politics, what conclusions can one draw about Georgia's options in regional politics for the short and medium-term future?

Since regaining its independence, Georgia has forged close and friendly ties with Türkiye, serving as an economic lifeline for the impoverished country. Back in the 1990s, the road through Türkiye was also a road towards closer links with the EU. Friendship has transformed into a trilateral strategic partnership on oil and gas pipelines and, later, railway links involving Azerbaijan. Until the 2020s, Georgia's alignment with Türkiye and Azerbaijan was a ticket for diluting Russia's influence but also a visible token of alliance with NATO and the US. As demonstrated above, Türkiye's anchoring in the Western security and political architecture has weakened considerably but it is a dynamic regional player on the ascendant. Still, Erdoğan's authoritarian tendencies make its internal politics brittle.

Russia, on the other hand, is weakened but no less dangerous. It has played its ultimate card—war—against Europe and is paying the price with Sweden and Finland in NATO, Poland's skyrocketing military spending, and the economic fallout from sanctions. Stymied in the north and west, Russia also looks to the south to compensate. In an environment meticulously contested by Ankara, the Kremlin is dallying with Azerbaijan and forging an alliance with Tehran.

Georgia is no longer an “agent” interested in opening up the region to extra-regional influences. This is good news for Russia but also for Türkiye.

Georgia also had its own share of transformations lately. Even as the long-shuttered path to EU membership has suddenly opened, Tbilisi opted against it, putting a stop to accession. Irked by the violence visited on peaceful protesters by the Georgian Dream, the US broke off the strategic alliance. Georgia is no longer an “agent” interested in opening up the region to extra-regional influences. This is good news for Russia but also for Türkiye.

Both capitals may encourage the embattled Georgian Dream government to finally take its seat in the so-called 3+3 format. Inaugurated after the 2020 Karabakh war, this diplomatic forum embodies the drive to “lock out” the region from external and leave the South Caucasus behind the “*iron jalousie*.” And while the Georgian Dream refused to attend, fearing fallout, it may now have little to lose. Russia's Sergey Lavrov [reiterated the invitation](#) past October.

Ankara, just like Moscow, Tehran, and Baku, has thrown a diplomatic and PR lifeline to the Georgian Dream whose legitimacy is strongly contested at home. They recognized the 26 October parliamentary elections and [congratulated](#) the newly

inaugurated President, Mikheil Kavelashvili. While all know the Georgian Dream's weakness, perhaps Türkiye is more concerned than others whether Georgia is strong enough to resist any Russian attempt for a complete takeover.

Come What May?

Türkiye is likely to adopt a hybrid strategy in the South Caucasus, combining elements of its approaches in Syria and Africa. On the one hand, Ankara will continue strengthening its military and strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, providing advanced weaponry and training. On the other hand, Türkiye could employ economic and infrastructural initiatives, such as expanding connectivity projects, to deepen its influence in Georgia and beyond.

Crucially, Türkiye's interactions with Russia in the South Caucasus will likely mirror the pragmatic balance observed in Syria. While Ankara and Moscow may remain competitors, they are likely to engage in dialogue to manage tensions and avoid destabilizing the region further. Objectively, Türkiye needs Georgia to remain sovereign and strong enough to resist a Russian takeover. Conversely, Russia's security services, whose imprint on Georgia's politics seems to widen, will try to fan the Turkophobic attitudes, playing – as in the 19th century – on ethnic and religious affiliations.

The longer Georgia is plunged in the crisis of legitimacy, the weaker its position becomes regionally and the less flexibility it has for retaining the agency in the process of dynamic realignment that is taking place.

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The rational course of action to navigate such complex dynamics of regional competition implies a multifaceted strategy focused on the following priorities:

- **Restoring the Popular Legitimacy of Governance:** The unfolding political crisis, sanctions, economic contraction, and, above all, fraying national cohesion is something Georgia can barely afford. The rational political actors must mobilize to end the crisis as soon as possible – and calling repeat elections whose results will be recognized by the widest swaths of the population seems like the most logical path to that.
- **Strengthening National Resilience:** Restoring governance must be accompanied by re-launching investment in security infrastructure, cybersecurity, and defense capabilities that are critical for Georgia to withstand external pressures. This includes enhancing its military, which has been neglected, bolstering border security, and developing mechanisms to counter hybrid threats such as disinformation campaigns. Türkiye – both bilaterally and as a NATO member – can be an essential ally in this.
- **Strengthening Existing Regional Alliances:** Georgia cannot afford to unravel its economic and security partnership with Azerbaijan and Türkiye despite changing international circumstances. Trilateral initiatives to foster economic integration and address shared security concerns must continue. It is crucial for Georgia's opposition forces to communicate the immutability of these commitments.
- **Enhancing Euro-Atlantic Integration:** Georgia needs to re-set relations with NATO and the EU to maintain its agency in the alliance with Ankara and Baku (but also vis-à-vis Moscow). Georgia's alignment with Euro-Atlantic stan-

dards creates a pull factor for Armenia and Türkiye. Despite the weakening international order, the EU is a potent regulatory and economic force that may help counterbalance. Strengthening ties with Western institutions remains essential for bolstering Georgia's security and financial resilience.

- *Proactive Diplomacy:* Georgia must reposition itself as a mediator and a venue for mediation of regional disputes, leveraging its strategic location to facilitate dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan involving external actors. Hosting peace talks or regional summits to address shared challenges will once again position Georgia as a “safe place” whose security is in the interests of competing regional actors.

Getting Back in the Game

The South Caucasus remains a microcosm of broader geopolitical trends, reflecting the enduring legacy of historical rivalries and the complexities of modern power dynamics.

The parallels between the Russian-Ottoman rivalry of the early 20th century and the current competition between Russia and Türkiye underscore the region's strategic significance. Drawing on the insights of Michael A. Reynolds, it is clear that geopolitical interests, rather than solely cultural or ethnic affiliations, have consistently driven competition in this region. While the withdrawal of extra-regional powers has created space for Moscow and Ankara to assert their influence, the future trajectory of their relations will depend on their ability to navigate the intricate balance between cooperation, rivalry, and managed competition. In this evolving landscape, Georgia needs to regain agency, something which is currently dulled by its political crisis ■

Assad's Downfall: A Lesson for Georgia

The international community was caught off guard by the sudden collapse of regional strongman Bashar Al Assad's regime in Syria. In less than ten days, the Assad family's 53-year reign over Syria came to an end. The fall of one of the most brutal dictatorial regimes demonstrates that ["no darkness lasts forever"](#) and the end of seemingly strong rulers can arrive unexpectedly when it is least expected. Understanding the reasons behind the collapse of the Assad family's half-century of oppressive rule is important, not only for examining regional dynamics and global security processes but also for drawing lessons relevant to people challenging autocratic regimes even in far-flung places.

From Tbilisi's perspective, the events unfolding in the Middle East are seen as distant developments that, while important, are less relevant to Georgia. However, in reality, the lessons from the Syrian

leader's fall are relevant as thousands of Georgians stand up to an oligarchic regime that is transforming the country into a Russian-style autocracy.

Collapse Without a Warning

The key lesson from the Syrian case is that authoritarian regimes collapse unexpectedly, even when they seem invincible.

The key lesson from the Syrian case is that authoritarian regimes collapse unexpectedly, even when they seem invincible. For years, Assad's hold on power appeared secure, yet his regime [collapsed](#) within days of a coordinated rebel offensive. Such regimes invest excessive resources to foster an illusion of invincibility, effectively concealing their internal vulnerabilities. However, this façade of strength can quickly dissolve when a crisis occurs,



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even amid external efforts to support the regime.

The Syrian president chose to uphold the illusion of stability at the expense of the lives of his closest associates. This serves as a stark reminder of how the pursuit of an illusory sense of stability and power can ultimately come at the expense of those who remain loyal to the regime.

Bashar Al-Assad's final hours in power reveal much about how authoritarian regimes cultivate a façade of stability. President Assad [kept everyone](#), including his relatives and closest allies, in the dark about his intentions to leave Syria. Hours before fleeing to Moscow, Assad assured a gathering of around 30 army and security chiefs at the defense ministry that Russian military support was forthcoming and [urged](#) ground forces to maintain their position. He did not even inform his younger brother, Maher, the commander of the Army's elite 4th Armored Division, as well as his cousins Ehab and Eyad Makhoulf who were killed while attempting to flee to Lebanon. He abandoned his closest associates and relatives, leaving them to face their own fate. Accounts from anonymous representatives of Assad's inner circle paint a vivid picture of his final hours, during which the Syrian president chose to uphold the illusion of stability at the expense of the lives of his closest associates. This serves as a stark reminder of how the pursuit of an illusory sense of stability and power can ultimately come at the expense of those who remain loyal to the regime.

Although there is no direct comparison between Assad's brutal dictatorship and the authoritarian regime in Georgia, recent developments in Syria offer valuable lessons that merit consideration. Notably, the Georgian authorities' disproportionate use of force against peaceful protesters is nothing more than a weakened and delegitimized

regime's attempt to project an illusion of invincibility. Reliance on sheer force and brutal intimidation tactics against political opponents merely mask internal vulnerabilities which reflect weakness rather than strength. Much like in Syria, the Georgian regime invests excessive resources to project a sense of stability, thereby masking the cracks in its crumbling system.

Therefore, this carefully cultivated façade of invincibility may collapse even more abruptly than expected. More importantly, regime loyalists should not be surprised if they learn of their leader's sudden departure from the news, much like Assad's supporters, who were left to face their unexpected fate.

Can't Trust Russia

Another important lesson is the shifting power dynamics extending well beyond Syria with significant regional and global repercussions. Notably, the inability to salvage Assad's regime, even with a substantial military presence, highlights Moscow's diminished standing in the region. In 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin deployed troops to Syria at Bashar al-Assad's request with a clear objective: to reaffirm Russia's status as a global power capable of counterbalancing the United States in the region, to bolster Moscow's influence in the Middle East, where its presence had diminished following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to escape the international isolation it [endured](#) following its annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, these gains seem to unravel following the swift collapse of the Assad regime. The failure to salvage a longstanding ally has revealed the limitations of Russia's security promises in the region and globally.

More importantly, Moscow's failure to maintain a loyal regime in a country where it has longstanding strategic interests—such as access to the Mediterranean Sea and crucial military bases—highlights how the conflict in Ukraine has weakened Russia

both militarily and politically. The degree to which the conflict in Ukraine has absorbed Moscow's military and political resources illustrates that, aside from Ukraine, Russia's other foreign policy objectives have been [consigned to secondary status](#). Hence, Moscow's strained financial, human, and military resources, combined with an unprecedented sanctions regime, significantly reduce the likelihood of Russia's military involvement in other theaters.

Moscow's failure to maintain a loyal regime in a country where it has long-standing strategic interests—such as access to the Mediterranean Sea and crucial military bases—highlights how the conflict in Ukraine has weakened Russia both militarily and politically.

This is a crucial factor from a Georgian standpoint as the ruling regime's propaganda heavily relies on fueling fears of war with Russia. Exploiting the threat of conflict has become a central narrative for the government, striking a chord in a society still grappling with the lasting scars of Russian military aggression. The shadowy notion of a "global war party," allegedly pushing for confrontation with Russia, has become a defining feature of the current Georgian leadership's rhetoric. "Either you fight Russia, or we will punish you" – this is the blunt message that Georgia and its people receive from the so-called "global war party", according to the the Georgian Dream (GD)'s [statement](#) of 8 January. Despite the blatant absurdity of this narrative, it has proven remarkably persistent and difficult to counter. Meanwhile, Moscow's failure to prop up the Assad regime underscores its limited military capacity while deeply entangled in the war in Ukraine. Simply put, Russia cannot sustain operations on multiple fronts. Even more humiliating for the Kremlin is its growing reliance on junior partners like Tehran and Pyongyang to sustain its campaign in Ukraine.

Moscow's failure to prop up the Assad regime underscores its limited military capacity while deeply entangled in the war in Ukraine.

Moreover, the conflict in Syria has always been less about Syria itself and more about revisionist actors seeking to undermine US interests. President Putin's strategic defeat in this theater can thus be interpreted as a clear indicator of Moscow's weakened geopolitical standing—a factor that could significantly influence the political landscape in Georgia.

Ankara On the Rise

Another important aspect of the Syrian leader's fall, particularly relevant from a Georgian perspective, is the rising influence of Türkiye. The fall of Assad's regime signifies more than just a regime change in Syria—it marks a profound shift in the distribution of power among regional actors. Gone are the days when Iran and Russia stood triumphant, bolstering Assad's regime to quash insurgencies. The events of December 2024 reflect a new regional landscape, where the influence of the aggressive revisionist powers—Tehran and Moscow—has notably diminished. Ankara emerges with a significantly strengthened regional stance in this evolving power dynamic. This shift also suggests a broader reconfiguration of power balance in the Middle East, with revisionist players finding their roles increasingly challenged.

A decade ago, Ankara's attempts to support insurgents and push for regime change in Syria resulted in Türkiye's regional isolation and strained its ties with Washington. Years of Ankara's efforts to boost its influence by mending relations with regional actors, known as the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, quickly dwindled. The extent of regional isolation prompted Ibrahim Kalin, who was then Erdoğan's chief policy adviser, to label

Ankara's support for the Islamist cause and the Syrian opposition as a [foreign policy of "precious loneliness."](#) However, with Assad's regional allies weakened by Israel's actions in Gaza and Lebanon and Russia preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, Erdoğan seized the opportunity to change the tide and bolster Türkiye's position in Syria. Today, with Assad no longer in power, the balance has swiftly tipped in Erdoğan's favor. This shift has established a new trend in the region, with Ankara actively working to reduce Moscow's influence across the wider region, firstly, by securing Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh and now, in Syria, by undermining Russia's closest ally. More importantly, Assad's fall presents Ankara with a unique opportunity for reconciliation with Washington as the differing interests in Syria have long been a significant obstacle in their bilateral relations. Whether Ankara and Washington can seize the emerging opportunities will become apparent in the weeks and months ahead.

This shift significantly impacts Georgia's domestic political landscape. In recent years, the domestic political struggle in Georgia has increasingly revolved around the geopolitical choices of key stakeholders. The ruling party has been widely perceived as a political force undermining Georgia's European agenda, subtly aligning itself with the interests of revisionist actors. The Media Development Foundation's (MDF) report clearly illustrates this trend, thoroughly examining the ruling party's anti-Western discourse [during the pre-2024 election campaign.](#)

The increasing influence of Türkiye may have a significant impact in this context. Notably, the rise of Ankara's influence comes at the expense of

the region's diminishing geopolitical standing of key revisionist actors—Moscow and Tehran. Assad's fall has opened the door to a new reality in US-Türkiye bilateral relations which could significantly alter the regional dynamics. The potential rapprochement between Ankara and Washington, coupled with the waning influence of Tehran and Moscow, threatens the core premise of the Georgian regime's anti-Western propaganda which centers on the notion of Western decline in favor of newly emerging power centers. Developments in Syria illustrate a diametrically different reality that, for the time being, seems less appealing to emerging autocratic regimes.

Assad's fall has opened the door to a new reality in US-Türkiye bilateral relations which could significantly alter the regional dynamics.

From this perspective, the abrupt fall of Assad's regime ushers in new realities for the region, sending shock waves far beyond the Middle East and significantly impacting political dynamics in distant places, including Georgia. The shifts in the regional balance of power, marked by the decline of revisionist actors and the strengthening of Ankara's geopolitical standing, alongside the exposure of inherent weaknesses within autocratic regimes, offer important lessons to reflect on. While Syria may appear distant in the Georgian context, recent developments may be more relevant than conventional wisdom suggests. The shadow of dethroned Assad stretches far beyond Syria, casting a long and ominous silhouette over Ivanishvili and his oligarchic authoritarian regime, a stark reminder of where blind loyalty to Moscow can lead ■

Three Years of War: Russia's Strategic Balance Sheet

As the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine approaches and the Trump administration seems determined to bring the war to an end, two opposing assessments are emerging. One suggests that Russia has largely achieved its war objectives and is prepared to negotiate to consolidate its gains. The other argues that Russia has suffered a strategic defeat and must negotiate to mitigate further losses.

The first view overemphasizes the territorial aspect of Russia's objectives, fostering the widespread yet flawed expectation that a peace-for-land settlement is both plausible and sustainable. The second mistakenly equates the high cost of Russia's military campaign with ultimate failure. While the war has cost Moscow dearly in blood and dollars, three years in, Russia is neither defeated nor deterred. It has placed its economy on a war footing, dedicating 8% of its GDP to military

expenditures and preparing for prolonged conflict with support from CRINK partners. Given this, why should Putin come to the negotiating table?

This article assesses the war's balance sheet from Russia's perspective and argues that, despite battlefield advances, Russia's political influence and power projection have diminished compared to pre-invasion levels. Moscow's setbacks—ranging from the breakdown of relations with the West to the fall of Assad in Syria, the Black Sea, and its so-called near abroad—may not be enough to alter its long-term ambitions, but could be decisive in pushing Russia toward a ceasefire in the short term. While there have been gains, such as increased leverage in Georgia, the overall strategic balance is negative, suggesting a potential recalibration in favor of a temporary pause. Any such move, however, is unlikely to aim at securing lasting peace but rather at regrouping for a fast and effective reconstitution.



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Russia's Objectives

Moscow has framed its [war aims](#) in Ukraine in both territorial and non-territorial terms. Securing Crimea and controlling the land bridge to the peninsula and the Azov Sea has been a key objective for historical and geopolitical reasons. However, Russia has made it clear that territorial conquest is merely a means to achieving broader strategic goals. These are primarily related to Ukraine's internal governance and external alignment. Russia aims to prevent Ukraine from joining Western institutions, particularly NATO, ensure its demilitarization, and install a government in Kyiv that aligns with Russian interests. As Putin has repeatedly stated, Russia will not allow Ukraine to become an [“anti-Russia.”](#) This means Ukraine cannot stand in opposition to the Russian political and societal model—it cannot be a democratic, meritocratic, or open society. Nor should it forge independent partnerships, sign trade agreements, or seek security guarantees from international actors that Russia considers rivals.

Russia's war objectives, however, extend beyond Ukraine, encompassing a broader global agenda. In its pre-invasion ultimatum to the US and NATO, Moscow effectively demanded a fundamental revision of post-Cold War European security. It sought to roll back NATO's presence in Eastern Europe, permanently bar Ukraine and Georgia from joining the alliance, and require Western coordination with Russia on key military activities, such as exercises. Since then, Russia has further globalized its war aims, framing its actions as part of a broader struggle for what Putin calls a “more just and inclusive international order.” In Moscow's vision, Western hegemony must give way to a [multipolar world](#). To advance this goal, Russia has deepened its outreach to the Global South and strengthened ties with China, Iran, and North Korea, forging a united front against the West.

Moscow now needs the greatest possible victory not only to compete with the US and the West—one of its original goals—but also to assert itself against an increasingly dominant China, an emboldened Türkiye, and other emerging powers.

While Russia has achieved notable successes—particularly in withstanding Western sanctions and avoiding international isolation—most of its non-territorial objectives remain unmet. Moreover, the balance of power between Russia and its partners has been shifting to Moscow's disadvantage. The presence of DPRK troops in Kursk, reliance on Iranian drones, and growing dependence on China are not signs of growing power but rather symptoms of what [Stephen Kotkin](#) calls Russia's perennial *“ambition-capabilities gap.”* In this context, success in Ukraine has taken on an additional dimension: rebalancing Russia's relations with its partners. Moscow now needs the greatest possible victory not only to compete with the US and the West—one of its original goals—but also to assert itself against an increasingly dominant China, an emboldened Türkiye, and other emerging powers.

Russia's Costs

Russian leadership can bear financial, political, and human costs that would be prohibitive in democracies. The lack of democratic accountability and a near-total absence of anti-imperial sentiment among Russians allow Putin to weather setbacks and retain public support despite human losses. With no domestic opposition to deter further aggression, his primary challenge lies in external calculations. He must carefully weigh gains and losses, reassess his assets, and adjust strategy accordingly. The following sections examine Russia's strategic costs accumulated over three years of war.

Syria

Syria was one of Putin's most prized geopolitical assets, providing Russia with a foothold in the Mediterranean and reinforcing its [claim to great power status](#) beyond its traditional sphere of influence. The military bases in Tartus and Khmeimim served as crucial logistical hubs, supporting Russian operations in Africa. Overstretched by the war in Ukraine, Russia watched from the sidelines as Assad's regime crumbled in a matter of days, jeopardizing a decade of military and political investments. Despite efforts to readjust and engage with Syria's new leadership, [Moscow lost](#) its 49-year lease on the Tartus naval base, creating a logistical challenge for Russia's vessels and the two submarines there. Moreover, the fall of Assad created a perception of Russia's diminished capacity to shore up its allies and undermined its credibility as an effective protector of client autocrats. While Russia still maintains a strong presence in Syria and retains the capacity to recalibrate, its setbacks are undeniable.

The loss of Syria is likely to reinforce Russia's determination to continue fighting in Ukraine. Moscow's official response suggests as much, acknowledging that while Assad was significant, Ukraine remains the top priority.

The loss of Syria is likely to reinforce Russia's determination to continue fighting in Ukraine. Moscow's official response suggests as much, acknowledging that while Assad was significant, Ukraine remains the top priority. As Tatyana Stanovaya, a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, [noted on X](#), "The war in Ukraine has, to some extent, cost him Syria, which reinforces his unwillingness to compromise." At the same time, however, the setback in Syria increases Russia's need to reposition its naval assets, including the two submarines, ideally moving them from Tartus to

the Black Sea to strengthen its battered fleet. This creates a compelling incentive for Russia to seek at least a temporary ceasefire—one that could facilitate the reopening of the straits and allow for critical redeployments from Syria to the Black Sea.

The Black Sea

The Black Sea has long been central to Russia's imperial vision, serving as a key gateway for projecting power into the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the Western Balkans. It has enabled military interventions in Syria and Libya and provided leverage to disrupt global grain trade. If Russia were to achieve its most ambitious objective—capturing Odesa—it would not only undermine Ukraine's viability but also allow Russia to secure unrivaled dominance over critical energy routes and global grain trade.

However, two main factors have constrained Russia's Black Sea Fleet, making this goal currently out of Moscow's reach. First, Ukraine's effective asymmetric naval campaign has inflicted heavy losses, including the destruction of roughly one-third of the fleet, notably the flagship Moskva. Second, Türkiye's strict enforcement of the Montreux Convention has blocked military vessel movement during the war. While this has limited NATO's access to the Black Sea, it has also prevented Russia from reinforcing its fleet curbing its offensive capabilities.

With Sweden and Finland joining NATO, Russia finds itself increasingly squeezed in the Baltic Sea, further boosting the strategic importance of the Black Sea. Under pressure from Ukrainian drone attacks, Moscow has sought to establish a more secure base for parts of its fleet, [initiating](#) the construction of a naval base in Ochamchire off the coast of Georgia's occupied Abkhazia. However, transforming this small, shallow port into a major fleet base requires significant investment and infrastructure development, delaying Russia's goal

of making it operational by the end of 2024. Russia's broader naval modernization plans depend on regaining secure access to its Black Sea ports, a goal contingent on halting hostilities and Türkiye reopening maritime passage.

Türkiye

The balance of power in Türkiye and Russia's "competitive cooperation" has increasingly shifted in Ankara's favor. In the South Caucasus, Türkiye's support for Azerbaijan led to the collapse of Nagorno-Karabakh, eroding Russia's once-uncontested influence in the region. Türkiye has expanded its presence in Central Asia and Africa, directly challenging Russian interests. Most significantly, Ankara is seen to have secured a significant victory in Syria, forcing Russia to shift to Libya as a base for its Africa operations. There, however, Moscow needs Turkish consent to access its airspace, further underscoring Moscow's need to cooperate with Ankara despite its often being on the opposing side.

Russian and Turkish interests also diverge in the Black Sea where Ankara has no desire to see Russia reassert dominance. Instead, Türkiye supports Ukraine retaining its coastline and strengthening its position as a counterweight to Russian naval power. However, both share a common goal: keeping extra-regional—primarily Western—powers out of the Black Sea. This alignment has allowed Ankara to position itself as a mediator, presenting a neutral stance in the war. At the same time, Türkiye's relationship with Ukraine remains strategic and Ankara has skillfully navigated the conflict—assisting Kyiv without provoking Moscow. Overall, Türkiye has emerged as one of the key beneficiaries of Russia's war in Ukraine, leveraging the conflict to enhance its regional influence.

China

Russo-Chinese alignment has been years in the making, culminating in the 2021 "no limits" part-

nership. However, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this relationship has evolved from having no limits to having no alternatives—at least for Moscow. China's support has significantly weakened both the intent and effectiveness of Western sanctions, supplying Russia with roughly 80 percent of its dual-use goods. Beijing has also amplified Russia's anti-Western rhetoric in the Global South and helped Moscow avoid international isolation through high-profile diplomatic engagements. Without China's assistance, Russia would likely have struggled to expand its war machinery and sustain the conflict at its current scale. Yet this reliance has deepened Russia's dependence on Beijing, shifting the partnership into an increasingly asymmetrical dynamic—one where Russia is the weaker party.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this relationship has evolved from having no limits to having no alternatives—at least for Moscow.

While Moscow projects confidence and publicly extols its partnership with China, signs of growing unease over its deepening strategic dependency are evident. The increasing focus on developing Russia's Far East betrays a sense of vulnerability along its long border with China. Meanwhile, Russian military bloggers have [reported](#) growing disenchantment within the establishment, describing the relationship as semi-colonial, with Russia reduced to a supplier of cheap resources for a rising superpower. In this context, Russia needs success in Ukraine to reaffirm its status as a global power and reassure its partners of its strength. It also requires time to modernize its military and fulfill its ambition of building a major, combat-trained, well-equipped neo-Soviet army.

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The Near Abroad

The war in Ukraine has also tested Russia's bandwidth in its near abroad, forcing Moscow to reassess its policy priorities and contend with the growing influence of other actors. In Central Asia, Russia now faces increasing competition from China whose economic and political footprint continues to expand. While Russia still benefits from legacy relationships, its dominance is no longer uncontested. A similar shift has occurred in the South Caucasus where Moscow abandoned its traditional support for Armenia and its strategy of leveraging unresolved conflicts. Instead, it has prioritized cooperation with Azerbaijan and Türkiye to gain a stake in regional connectivity. Moreover, Russia's entanglement in Ukraine has made defending Armenia against Azerbaijan and antagonizing Türkiye untenable.

The end of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has reshaped the region's geopolitical balance, strengthening not only Türkiye's influence but also Iran's as Tehran emerged as Armenia's main regional supporter. Russia's reliance on Iranian military assistance has further compelled Moscow to accommodate Tehran's interests, particularly regarding the contested Zangezur Corridor.

Unable to exert equal influence across the former Soviet space, Russia has doubled down on its conquest of Ukraine and the creation of a Slavic Union, signaling a shift toward greater regional differentiation and a reassessment of its priorities. According to Carnegie Europe Analyst [Thomas de Waal](#), the openly neo-imperialist Novorossiia project—which envisions a unified state-civilization encompassing Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus—reflects the failure of softer integration efforts like the CIS and EEU. In his view, the war in Ukraine may have inadvertently marked the end of Russia's Near Abroad.

The West

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has severed Russia's political and economic ties with the West. While reduced economic integration may shield Russia from Western leverage and sanctions, the long-term damage is undeniable. Moscow has also lost significant political influence over Europe, particularly as the end of Europe's energy dependence has stripped Russia of one of its most effective pressure tools. Opportunities for targeted cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as the Arctic, nuclear non-proliferation, and more, have also been lost.

Additionally, the war has forged a reluctant but firm European consensus that Russia is a security threat, pushing defense to the top of the EU's political agenda. This shift led to Sweden and Finland joining NATO, effectively surrounding Russia with NATO allies in the Baltic Sea. Moreover, Russian aggression has revived the EU enlargement debate with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia becoming membership candidates—developments that run counter to Russia's strategic objectives. Against these setbacks, Moscow will likely seek ways to retaliate and rebuild its leverage.

Balance Sheet and the Precarious Case of Georgia

Among Russia's neighbors, until just recently, Georgia has been one of the most resolute in distancing itself from Moscow's influence and aligning with Western institutions. Its pro-Western foreign policy was shaped by a broad domestic consensus that Georgia's historical and geopolitical trajectory belonged in Europe. In this context, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD)'s recent reversal—including the suspension of EU accession talks—marks a strategic victory for Russia.

Russia so far has refrained from backing the Georgian Dream beyond propaganda efforts—partly due to limited capacity and partly because it sees the party as a risky investment.

However, this gain remains precarious due to widespread domestic resistance to the Georgian Dream's increasingly anti-Western policies. Months of sustained protests have plunged Georgia into a political and constitutional crisis, creating uncertainty about its long-term trajectory. The Georgian Dream is valuable to Russia only as long as it maintains control and retains enough legitimacy to steer the country in Moscow's favor. Ideally, from Russia's perspective, mass protests would escalate into violence, justifying full-scale suppression. The Georgian Dream, facing increasing Western sanctions, would drift further into Moscow's orbit, potentially joining the 3+3 regional format and expressing interest in BRICS—moves Russia would likely support. This scenario would complete Georgia's transformation into a regional stronghold of anti-Westernism, but the protest movement limits its likelihood. For this reason, Russia so far has refrained from backing the Georgian Dream beyond propaganda efforts—partly

due to limited capacity and partly because it sees the party as a risky investment.

Russia launched its military aggression against Ukraine to boost its global standing and redefine the parameters of international order. However, its current geopolitical weight relative to the pre-invasion period appears diminished. Russia's ability to galvanize discontent and build anti-Western partnerships is noteworthy. Yet its dependence on others to creep forward in the war against Ukraine, let alone achieve its global ambitions, betrays vulnerability. A previous balance in relations with Iran and North Korea, clearly in Russia's favor, has changed as Moscow's reliance on their support has grown. The deepening alignment with China also raises fears that Russia will develop a risky strategic dependency. The breakdown of cooperation with the West on all fronts, including nuclear non-proliferation, climate change, and the Arctic, is also detrimental to Russia in the long run. However, Moscow is betting on success in Ukraine which it hopes will mitigate all costs. The more Russia escalates, both vertically in Ukraine and horizontally in other parts of the world, the more consequential the success of the Ukraine campaign becomes both for Russia and the West ■

Can Targeted Sanctions Set the Georgian Dream on Fire?

“I don’t see any problem. I don’t expect any sanctions or for someone to be sanctioned (...). All this is not serious; it’s just ridiculous.” “The sanctions are not a problem; everything will change and be settled. There will be a different world and Europe soon.” These statements belong to Kakha Kaladze, Mayor of Tbilisi, and the current Secretary General of the Georgian Dream. The two statements were made six months apart in [June](#) and [December](#) 2024; that is, before the fraudulent elections on 26 October, the Georgian Dream’s decision to suspend negotiations with the EU on 28 November, and after the announcement of the first European and American sanctions.

How Did We Get Here?

Unlike Kaladze, a footballer-turned-mayor with limited knowledge of international relations, Ivanishvili—the true decision-maker in Georgia—was well aware of the path he was steering the coun-

try toward and had long been preparing for international sanctions. On December 30, 2023, upon announcing his second official return to politics as Honorary Chairman of Georgian Dream, he [claimed](#) to be “already de facto under sanctions,” citing his lawsuit against *Credit Suisse*, which had frozen approximately USD 500 million of his assets, as supposed proof. His conspiracy theory—that *Credit Suisse* acted on orders from the U.S. government—became a central narrative for the ruling party and a focal point of Georgia’s foreign policy.

During his visit to Tbilisi in May 2024, Jim O’Brien, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, was boycotted by Ivanishvili but met with the oligarch’s Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze. O’Brien could barely conceal his astonishment when Kobakhidze told journalists he had shared “only 30%” of what he knew about the so-called global war party. In response, the Amer-



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ican diplomat [remarked](#), “At this stage, there is no sanction on him (Ivanishvili). The fact that such an influential person is so ill-informed is both disappointing and shocking.”

Shortly after passing the “foreign agents” law in May 2024, the Georgian Dream-controlled parliament rushed through [legislation](#) facilitating the repatriation of offshore funds. These tax code amendments granted exemptions not only for offshore financial assets but also for non-financial holdings such as yachts and aircraft brought into Georgia. The move was clearly driven by Ivanishvili’s growing concerns over impending Western sanctions. A *Transparency International Georgia* study revealed that Ivanishvili owns dozens of offshore companies in jurisdictions like Panama, the Virgin Islands, and the Cayman Islands. Since December 2024, he has rapidly transferred funds into eight [newly registered](#) shareholding companies in Georgia, held in the names of his family members.

Western sanctions—visa bans, asset freezes, and the blacklisting of individuals connected to the Georgian regime under the Magnitsky Act—are steadily [becoming a reality](#). Just a year ago, this seemed unlikely, as the government was still basking in the achievement of EU candidate status while claiming to have preserved its “dignity,” a euphemism for refusing to meet Brussels’ conditions.

Anticipating Western sanctions after Georgia’s geopolitical shift and crackdown on protests, Ivanishvili sought a pretext to deflect blame for breaking with the West. He framed his legal dispute with *Credit Suisse* as U.S.-orchestrated pressure, despite [winning](#) in arbitration courts—making his conspiracy claims absurd. To justify state involvement, he recast the issue as a broader Western plot to blackmail him into dragging Georgia into war with Russia. In a quasi-Thomistic co-substantiality fusion, he equated his personal financial defense with safeguarding the Georgian nation, presenting himself as a martyr [punished](#) not for state capture

and repression but for resisting Western-imposed war and moral decay, including same-sex marriage.

It remains unclear whether Ivanishvili orchestrated this scheme entirely to justify his growing alignment with Moscow, genuinely believes in the conspiracy, or has been manipulated by Russia. However, the undeniable reality is that all of Georgia is now trapped in this surreal narrative.

Where Does Georgia Stand Now?

While discussions now center on Western sanctions, historically, it was Moscow that used coercive measures to exert influence, even before Mikheil Saakashvili's pro-Western government. Under Shevardnadze's presidency in 2000, Russia [introduced](#) a visa regime for Georgian citizens while exempting those in the Kremlin-backed separatist regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. Around the same time, Moscow also attempted to block remittance transfers from Georgian emigrants, a move the Russian ambassador, Felix Stanevski, described as the end of "Russian economic aid" to Georgia.

By 2006, under Saakashvili's leadership, the Russian government [imposed](#) an embargo on Georgian agricultural products, dealing a severe blow to the wine industry, which heavily depended on the Russian market. This embargo [remained in place](#) until 2013 when the Georgian Dream came to power. That same year, Moscow forcibly deported 4,634 Georgian citizens, indiscriminately expelling both legal and undocumented residents. Many were transported on cargo planes unfit for human passengers. In 2019, the European Court of Human Rights ruled against Russia, [ordering](#) compensation for the victims, citing violations of their rights and the harm they endured.

It would have been unthinkable just a few years ago that Georgia, once a victim of Russian sanctions and military aggression, would now be facing Western sanctions. This paradoxical trajectory is largely the result of Bidzina Ivanishvili's "inimitable style" and political strategy. In December 2023, Georgia secured EU candidate status, even though then-Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili framed the EU as an oppressor. After celebrating this achievement, the Georgian Dream swiftly undermined it by adopting laws that directly contradicted the EU's fundamental values, sabotaging Georgia's path toward integration. By spring 2024, the ruling party had escalated an aggressive anti-Western campaign, amplifying narratives about the "global war party" while simultaneously boasting about candidate status to confuse voters. Following the [fraudulent](#) 26 October elections, the Georgian Dream formally halted EU integration and accelerated its transformation into a Belarus-style autocracy. Repression intensified, with draconian laws modeled after Russian legislation, widespread political persecution, and escalating violence. Georgia now nears over one hundred political prisoners, as international watchdogs, including Amnesty International, report systematic torture and human rights abuses.

In response to Georgia's rapid slide into authoritarianism, the EU has so far only agreed to suspend visa-free travel for holders of Georgian diplomatic passports. Broader sanctions remain stalled due to opposition from Hungary and, to a lesser extent, Slovakia—both seen as key defenders of Ivanishvili's regime within the EU. Budapest has even refused to implement the suspension of diplomatic visa-free travel. However, several EU member states, including the Baltic States, Germany, and the Czech Republic, have taken unilateral action, imposing travel bans and asset freezes on Georgian officials. Under Schengen rules, such bans can be extended across the bloc at the discretion of individual member states.

Beyond the EU, the UK has sanctioned several Georgian officials responsible for repression, barring them from entry and freezing their assets. A group of British MPs has also [pushed](#) for sanctions against Ivanishvili and his companies, with some advocating for his frozen assets to be repurposed to support democracy in Georgia. Additionally, Irakli Rukhadze, owner of the pro-government Imedi TV, is under scrutiny as his company and assets are registered in the UK.

The United States has taken even stronger measures, beginning in 2023 by sanctioning corrupt Georgian judges and expanding penalties to include dozens of top officials, culminating in the blacklisting of Ivanishvili himself. [Sanctioned](#) under the Russian Harmful Activities Sanctions regime (EO 14024), he is accused of enabling human rights abuses and obstructing Georgia's democratic and pro-European path to serve Russian interests. In December 2024, several high-ranking officials from the Ministry of the Interior, including Minister Gomelauri, were added to the Magnitsky list, which targets individuals involved in severe human rights violations.

What Type of Sanctions for the Georgian Dream?

Sanctions against Ivanishvili are unfolding as a self-fulfilling prophecy, with Georgian civil society urging Washington, Brussels, and other Western capitals to accelerate their implementation. However, some in the West remain skeptical about their effectiveness in dismantling authoritarian regimes. They cite long-standing examples such as Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, and Russia, where despite economic hardship, dictatorships have endured.

Critics argue that sanctions can backfire by reinforcing authoritarian narratives, with regimes using propaganda to portray foreign pressure as

a conspiracy against national sovereignty. Additionally, broad economic sanctions tend to harm ordinary citizens more than ruling elites, who often find ways to bypass restrictions through illicit financial networks.

Targeting an entire country's economy can be counterproductive, as seen in Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba, where sanctions have led to widespread poverty, food and healthcare crises, and deteriorating infrastructure. Opponents frequently reference Iraq under Saddam Hussein, where sanctions were blamed for soaring child mortality due to malnutrition and collapsing healthcare—though later studies suggested some figures were manipulated to discredit the U.S. Regardless, humanitarian concerns continue to fuel doubts about the effectiveness of economic sanctions.

Economic sanctions often increase discontent with authoritarian regimes but rarely succeed in toppling them. Venezuela exemplifies this: despite an [unprecedented](#) economic collapse—its GDP shrinking by 8.5 times between 2012 and 2020 and inflation hitting 63,374% in 2018—the Maduro regime remains in power. With 91% of the population in poverty, the crisis is partially offset by mass emigration (7 million people) and continued remittances. In some cases, economic hardship even strengthens authoritarian control. North Korea deliberately starves its population to suppress dissent, while Venezuela's CLAP food distribution program [ensures](#) loyalty by selectively supplying necessities to regime supporters.

Meanwhile, corrupt elites thrive under sanctions, exploiting smuggling and illicit trade networks, as seen with Venezuela's military and Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Propaganda further shields regimes, redirecting blame to Western sanctions. Cuba and Iran have long used anti-American rhetoric to justify economic struggles, a tactic the Georgian Dream is likely to adopt, portraying EU measures as an attack on the Georgian people

rather than the regime.

Suspending Georgia's visa-free travel with Schengen countries could have unpredictable effects—potentially fueling anti-regime sentiment or reinforcing GD's narrative of Western “humiliation.” Instead, targeted sanctions against those responsible for repression—officials, judges, and regime-aligned businessmen—would be more effective. With Georgia's population overwhelmingly pro-Western, broad punitive measures risk alienating ordinary citizens, while precise action against the ruling elite could help weaken the regime without undermining public support for the EU.

Failing to sanction the Georgian Dream is not a neutral stance—it is a policy choice with serious consequences. Without consequences, the ruling party will continue deceiving segments of the population by claiming there is no real break with the West. This narrative helps retain supporters who are uncomfortable with openly pro-Russian policies. Sanctions would make it clear: the Georgian Dream and Ivanishvili are anti-European and hostile to EU values.

For others, the absence of sanctions reinforces the perception of Western weakness, indecision, and decline—emboldening Ivanishvili to escalate repression against the opposition, civil society, and independent media. Moreover, inaction would damage the EU and the U.S. standing among Georgia's pro-Western citizens, raising doubts about their commitment to defending democratic values. It is already painful for many to watch the ruling elite sabotage Georgia's European future while enjoying the privileges of the West—owning property, educating their children, and vacationing there.

Sanctions also serve as a critical show of international solidarity with the tens of thousands of Georgians protesting for democracy. These demonstrators rely on Western support, knowing that

internal mobilization alone may not be enough. Every EU or U.S. sanction against a Georgian Dream official or enabler of repression fuels hope and strengthens the movement. The synergy between domestic resistance and external pressure is essential for success—creating a necessary cycle of momentum against authoritarian entrenchment.

Who Should Be Sanctioned?

Targeted sanctions against key Georgian officials could be highly effective. Ivanishvili's authoritarian regime relies on three key pillars: a bureaucracy fully absorbed by the ruling party, a corrupt judiciary and law enforcement under his control, and a powerful propaganda machine led by outlets like Imedi TV, PosTV, the Georgian Public Broadcaster, and Rustavi2. Unless these pillars are weakened, the regime will remain resilient against internal dissent.

Unlike Ivanishvili, Georgian Dream elites—ministers, MPs, judges, high-ranking police officers, diplomats, and affiliated businessmen—are more vulnerable to Western sanctions. They hold no real political influence or say in Georgia's foreign policy, serving solely to advance Ivanishvili's personal interests in exchange for financial benefits. Many have built their lives around the West, sending their children to study abroad and investing in European assets, despite lacking any ideological commitment beyond material gain. For most Georgians under 50, Russia is not a viable alternative, and even former Soviet-era officials have families unwilling to relocate to Russia, Iran, or China.

This dependency on Western financial and social privileges makes them more susceptible to targeted pressure. They have carried out Ivanishvili's increasingly pro-Russian policies without expecting a full break with the West. Until recently, Western governments were relatively tolerant, allowing figures like Irakli Rukhadze, owner of the main pro-government TV network, to register

businesses in the UK and the Netherlands while simultaneously spreading anti-Western propaganda. Stripping them of these privileges would expose their hypocrisy and significantly destabilize the regime's internal cohesion.

All of this is to say that Georgian Dream political, bureaucratic, and business elites were not expecting such a radical break with the West. Even after the adoption of the Russian laws and tensions with the EU and the US, these elites were privately communicating to Western diplomats that all of this was temporary and due to the electoral campaign and sooner or later it would be “back to business as usual.”

As previously noted, key figures within the Georgian Dream do not make significant decisions. The shift away from the West and the forced transition toward the Russian-Belarusian model was solely Ivanishvili's decision—likely under Russian pressure—with the entire system following his lead. At 69, having spent much of his life in Russia, Ivanishvili is as much Russian as he is Georgian. His [business](#) career was shaped in Russia, giving him extensive ties and experience there, unlike most Georgians. For years, he even adopted the Russianized version of his name, Boris, by which he is still known in Russian oligarchic circles. Unlike his associates, a return to Russia would not be a dramatic shift for him but rather a return to familiar ground. His past involvement in Russian politics, including financing General Lebed's career, underscores his deep connections.

In contrast, Georgian Dream politicians, civil servants, and business elites—who have built their lives around Western access—are far more alarmed at the prospect of EU and U.S. sanctions. The possibility of visa bans and asset freezes is already causing unease, leading to growing internal tensions. Business figures who previously thrived under government protection have begun to voice concerns, as seen in a December meeting between

entrepreneurs and de facto Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze. Though many of them were staunch Georgian Dream supporters, the looming threat of sanctions has, for the first time, made them question the government's trajectory. At this stage, the regime's internal cohesion is its greatest vulnerability, and personal sanctions—or even their credible threat—could play a decisive role in accelerating its erosion.

Despite their corruption and lack of principles, the Georgian Dream elite still sees Europe—not Russia or China—as their horizon. There are, of course, exceptions, such as Otar Partskhaladze, the former Prosecutor General who now oversees the business community on Ivanishvili's behalf. [Sanctioned](#) by the United States for his ties to Russian intelligence, Partskhaladze has been actively working to shift business networks toward Russia. However, his efforts have yet to yield full success, as many within the elite remain reluctant to fully sever their ties with the West.

Ivanishvili may one day echo Zimbabwe's former dictator Robert Mugabe, declaring, “We don't mind sanctions banning us from Europe. We are not Europeans!” But if that moment comes, how will his loyal elites react? Are they truly ready to sever ties with the West and embrace full isolation?

Dictators despise sanctions, yet they go to great lengths to downplay their impact—an effort that ironically confirms their effectiveness. In 2014, following the first wave of Western sanctions after Russia's annexation of Crimea, Sergey Lavrov [insisted](#), “Russia will not only survive but will come out much stronger... Sanctions are a sign of irritation, not a serious policy tool.” Putin echoed this dismissive stance, [telling](#) CBS's Charlie Rose, “If someone prefers to use sanctions, they are welcome to do so. But sanctions are temporary measures... illegal under international law. Tell me where they have ever been effective. The answer is nowhere.”

If sanctions are truly ineffective (and supposedly illegal), why does Putin's Russia repeatedly use them to punish defiant neighbors? Moscow has imposed sanctions on Georgia, Ukraine, the Baltic states, Poland, and Moldova, among others. When Georgian Dream officials claim they are unfazed by sanctions, it is likely the opposite.

Following the U.S. decision to sanction Ivanishvili, the regime's de facto Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, rushed to frame it as a badge of honor, declaring, "In reality, it is an award, a prize for defending the national interests of our country." One might suspect that many Georgians would not mind if their unofficial ruler received more such "awards" from the West.

Western sanctions are already igniting cracks within Georgian Dream's ruling elite. Once confident in their loyalty to Ivanishvili, they now see their assets and Western access at risk. Many assumed tensions with Brussels and Washington were fleeting, but as targeted measures loom, their blind allegiance is faltering. The West must strike the Ivanishvili matchstick—once lit, the fire will spread, igniting the entire Georgian Dream box. As the cost of loyalty rises, business leaders and bureaucrats will scramble to save themselves, accelerating the regime's collapse from within ■

Without Breaking Unanimity the EU Shall Not Pass

The days of the mid-90s and early 2000s—when the EU was a dominant player in its neighborhood and the accession process served as a viable means to transform aspiring countries—are long gone. To remain relevant, the EU must now adapt by making its decision-making process more flexible. It needs to shift from passivity to proactive engagement, moving beyond merely understanding what needs to be done but lacking the means to act. This cannot be done without finding ways to overcome the vetoes of individual states, which deadlocks the EU's ability to act.

To remain relevant, the EU must now adapt by making its decision-making process more flexible.

The requirement for unanimity, combined with Russia's "Trojan horses" within the bloc, severely limits its ability to maneuver as a true global power. Recent developments in the Eastern neighbor-

hood, particularly in Georgia, present a serious challenge for the EU. Once firmly pro-European, Georgia now teeters on the brink of falling into Russia's orbit—held back only by the determined resistance of its people.

In its relations with Georgia, the European Union faces stiff competition from Azerbaijan, China, Russia, and Türkiye. Unlike the EU, these countries are willing to unconditionally support the Georgian Dream government without demanding democratic reforms.

In its relations with Georgia, the European Union faces stiff competition from Azerbaijan, China, Russia, and Türkiye. Unlike the EU, these countries are willing to unconditionally support the Georgian Dream (GD) government without demanding democratic reforms. Their flexibility in decision-making makes them much more appealing to the Georgian Dream than the EU.



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A mix of coercion, tolerance for human rights violations, investments and assistance without reform conditions, and unrestricted trade—free of tariff and non-tariff barriers—created a comfortable space for the authoritarian Georgian government. Conversely, the EU failed to win over the Georgian Dream leadership by offering EU membership in exchange for democratic transformation. By granting Georgia candidate status in 2023, the EU surrendered yet another key leverage over the GD.

So far, the “offers” from Ankara, Moscow, Baku, and Beijing have tilted the balance in their favor, at least when it comes to influencing the Georgian government. However, unlike GD leadership, they have failed to capture the hearts and minds of the Georgian people, who continue to fight for their country’s European future. Russia has become more aggressive, waging full-scale wars

against neighbors that resist its influence. China is expanding its economic reach through the Belt and Road Initiative, securing access to key land routes—such as Georgia’s East-West Highway, now being built by Chinese companies—and strategic seaports, including Anaklia, where a Chinese-Singaporean consortium, already sanctioned by the US for corruption, is set to take the lead.

Speaking with one voice should not become a weakness that renders the EU less competitive and incapable of bold action.

In this ongoing struggle between pro-European society and the pro-Russian Georgian Dream, the EU must act decisively rather than remain on the sidelines. The bloc’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was designed to strengthen the

Union but is now only weakening it. Speaking with one voice should not become a weakness that renders the EU less competitive and incapable of bold action.

The case of Georgia highlights the shortcomings of the CFSP, which, despite being established by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993 and strengthened by subsequent treaties—Amsterdam (1999), Nice (2003), and Lisbon (2009)—fails to respond effectively to fast-changing realities on the ground. According to Article 24(1) of the EU Treaty, the CFSP “shall be defined and implemented by the European Council and the Council acting unanimously, except where the Treaties provide otherwise.” This unanimity requirement has created a vicious cycle: while the EU possesses the necessary tools and mechanisms, their application is effectively blocked by the need for consensus—especially with the presence of GD-friendly and Russia-aligned governments like those in Budapest and Bratislava.

The EU’s response to the violent suppression of peaceful protesters in Georgia exposes its operational limitations.

In 2020, the EU [adopted](#) Council Regulation (EU) 2020/1998, enabling restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses. The regulation is based on breaches of fundamental freedoms, including the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. However, the EU’s response to the violent suppression of peaceful protesters in Georgia exposes its operational limitations.

While the [United Kingdom](#) and the [United States](#) have imposed sanctions on high-ranking officials from Georgia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) and on Georgian Dream’s founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, for human rights violations and brutal crackdowns, the EU’s only adopted measure was [to suspend visa-free travel](#) for diplomatic passport

holders. Yet, this sanction is largely symbolic—easily circumvented, as those targeted also hold ordinary passports, allowing them access to the EU and Schengen zone countries. Hungary already [announced](#) that it will not enforce the EU decision to suspend visa-free travel for Georgian diplomatic passport holders. This discrepancy underscores the EU’s inability to take decisive action in the face of democratic backsliding and human rights abuses in Georgia.

The Lisbon Treaty provided a pathway to extending Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) to Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) matters through the use of so-called *passerelle* clauses. Article 31(2) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) states: “The Council shall act by a qualified majority when adopting a decision defining a Union action or position on a proposal which the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has presented following a specific request from the European Council, made on its initiative or that of the High Representative.”

Despite this provision, the EU remains hamstrung by its unanimity requirement. The bloc’s new High Representative, Kaja Kallas, [attempted](#) to push for sanctions against Georgia at her first meeting of EU foreign ministers but failed to secure the necessary consensus. This failure showed the EU’s deep divisions over Georgia, driven by three key factors:

- A lack of strong political will to impose sanctions.
- The obstructionism of Hungary and Slovakia, whose pro-Russian and GD-friendly governments exploit the unanimity rule to block action.
- The EU’s lingering fear that sanctions would drive the Georgian Dream even further into Russia and China’s orbit, severing all remaining communication channels.

This concern over maintaining diplomatic ties was notably echoed by EU Ambassador Paweł Herczyński who, in justifying his controversial post-election [meeting](#) with the GD's Foreign Minister Maka Botchorishvili on 26 October 2024, emphasized the need to keep dialogue open—even at the cost of inaction.

The EU Cannot Afford a Second Belarus

The EU's response to the GD's actions is too little, too late—reminiscent of its delayed reaction to Belarus's authoritarian turn in 2020. Instead of taking the initiative, the EU allowed the Georgian Dream to dictate the agenda and responded (not sufficiently) only after the *fait accompli* of grabbed power and captured institutions.

The EU's immediate response to the Georgian elections was not based on unanimity. Only half of the block - 15 foreign ministers of EU member states, made a joint [statement](#) stressing that “the violations of electoral integrity are incompatible with the standards expected from a candidate to the European Union” and “are a betrayal of the Georgian people's legitimate European aspiration.” The EU's already ambiguous stance weakened further following Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's [visit](#) to Tbilisi the day after the elections, during which he congratulated the GD's newly appointed Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze. Attempts to discuss the situation in Georgia in several Foreign Affairs Councils in 2024 and not managing to agree on the course of action or any concrete measure buoyed the GD in believing that they could get away with the crackdowns and human rights violations guaranteed that their “friends in the EU” would block any sanction at the EU level.

Moreover, the [statement](#) by the EU HRVP Josep Borrell on 27 October 2024, announcing the deployment of a technical mission to assess the post-elec-

tion situation, proved either premature or insincere as no follow-up action was taken. The EU faltered again on 16 December 2024 when, due to Hungary and Slovakia's [veto](#), EU foreign ministers disagreed on imposing personal sanctions against GD officials.

These examples highlight that the EU is sluggish in responding to crises in its neighborhood. At the same time, countries like China, Russia, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan quickly moved to accommodate Georgian Dream officials. Unlike the EU, Beijing, Moscow, Ankara, Yerevan, and Baku wasted no time legitimizing the 26 October 2024 general elections, never questioning the results and congratulating the newly elected leaders. Baku, Yerevan, and Abu Dhabi have even hosted official delegations of the Georgian Dream.

As of the publishing of this piece, no EU leader has visited Tbilisi to show solidarity with protesters fighting for Georgia's European future. The ambassadors of the EU member states - Hungary, Slovakia, Italy, as well as the Ambassador of the UK - have even paid official visits to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Georgian Dream propaganda used these mixed signals well to show that business continues with the EU as usual and the critical statements from various individual politicians are made under the influence of the “deep state” or are the result of either Europe's internal problems or personal animosities of concrete politicians. Sporadic critical statements from the EU leaders, such as Kaja Kallas' recent [tweet](#) that “Georgia falls short of any expectation from a candidate country” and that “the EU stands with the people of Georgia in their fight for freedom and democracy,” only reinforce the perception that the EU is toothless especially since such statements are often followed by [calls](#) from various EU capitals “that the words are not enough” and that Kallas should actually visit Tbilisi and show support for the protesters on the ground.

The EU has also been unable to use free trade as its leverage. As [shown](#) in the previous issue of this

Table: Exports by Country (2015–2024)

Year	China	Azerbaijan	Russia	Türkiye	EU
2015	5.6%	10.9%	7.4%	8.4%	28.3%
2016	8.2%	7.2%	9.8%	8.2%	25.7%
2017	7.3%	10%	14.5%	7.9%	23.8%
2018	5.9%	15%	13%	7.1%	21.1%
2019	5.45%	13.4%	13%	5.3%	21.3%
2020	14.2%	13.1%	13.1%	5.7%	20.5%
2021	14.5%	12.5%	14.4%	7.6%	15.9%
2022	13.1%	12%	11.5%	7.8%	15.8%
2023	5.1%	14.1%	10.8%	6.7%	12%
2024	4.6%	11%	10.4%	7%	8.7%

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia

journal, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement has not led to a planned trade turnover increase. Since 2015, the EU's share in Georgian exports has plummeted—from 28.3% in 2015 to just 8.7% in 2024 (See the table above). The EU's failure to acknowledge the shifting geopolitical landscape costs it influence in Georgia, while authoritarian powers fill the vacuum.

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Meanwhile, among Georgia's top investors, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and China turn a blind eye to the lack of judicial independence, elite corruption, and human rights violations. With the EU, France, Germany, Sweden, and the UK suspending financial aid to Georgia, it is only a matter of time before the Georgian Dream turns to China or Azerbaijan for support. This raises the growing risk of Georgia falling into a "debt trap" scenario where economic dependence on authoritarian powers could further erode its sovereignty. A clear demonstration of looking for alternative finances was the recent visit of GD

Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze to the United Arab Emirates and the Memorandum of Understanding, which, as GD leaders claimed, pledges the investment of USD 6 billion in Georgia's real estate sector.

One At a Time

The European Union cannot afford to remain a bystander while the Georgian people fight for their European future. Freezing the accession process, withholding direct budgetary support, or making symbolic gestures—such as sending technical missions or restricting visa-free travel for diplomatic passport holders—will not deter the Georgian Dream from its authoritarian course. It will only strengthen the GD leaders' belief that the EU will only talk the talk and not walk the walk.

The EU member states should start acting unilaterally, attempting to cross the bridge one by one rather than collectively.

However, for the walk to be successful, the EU member states should start acting unilaterally, attempting to cross the bridge one by one rather than

collectively. Germany, Czechia and the Baltic States have already taken independent action under their national legislation, proving that targeted measures are possible. Other EU members must follow suit. For instance, individual EU member states can impose bilateral sanctions, ban Georgian Dream members from entering their countries, and declare that bilateral relations are on hold or relegated to the technical level in parliamentary resolutions or official government statements.

Furthermore, EU member states must not accept Georgian ambassadors appointed by Mr. Kavelashvili, a football player turned ultra-right politician turned President. They should also not hold formal bilateral or multilateral talks with the oligarch's government. Increasing the perception of a total lack of legitimacy, even at the bilateral level, can be a game-changer in Mr. Ivanishvili's calculations ■

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