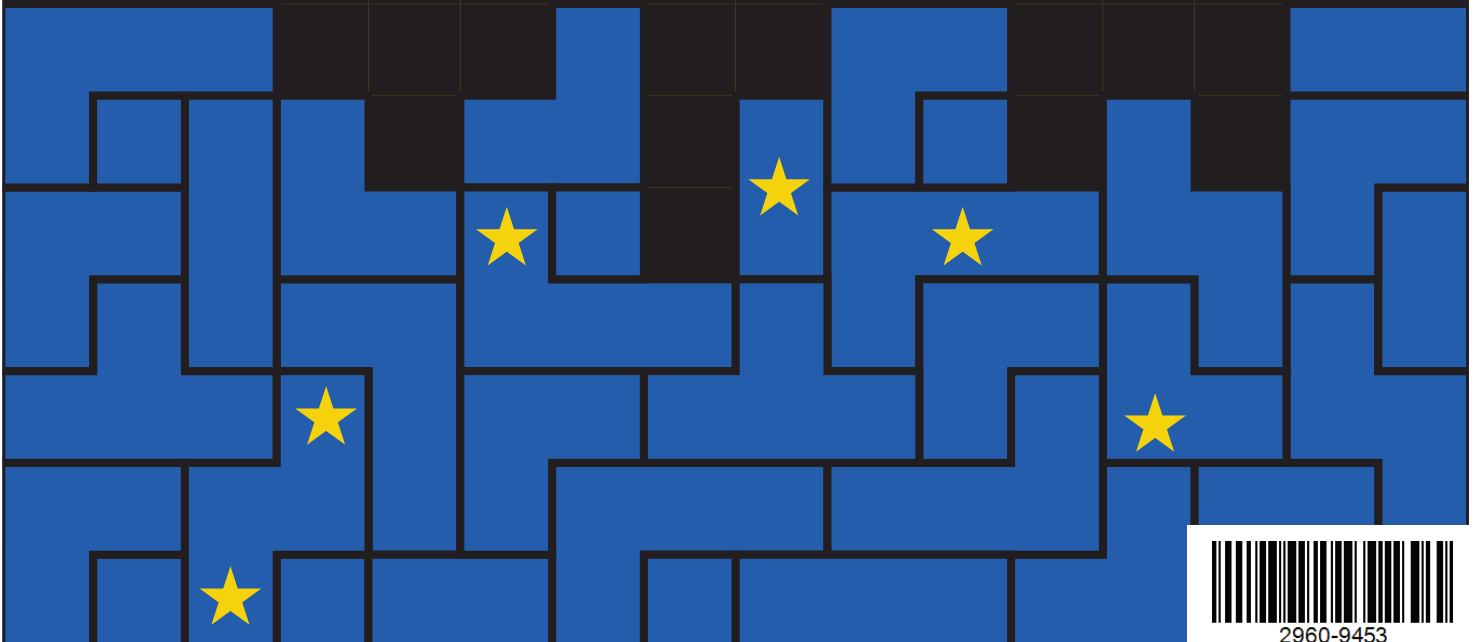
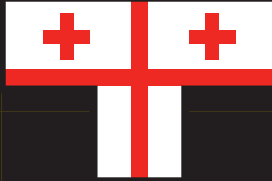


GEO POLITICS

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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise** we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis can contribute to advancing national interests and strengthening democratic institutions when it is undertaken with integrity and impartiality. 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, entitled **GEOpolitics**, upholds a staunch dedication to the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. **GEOpolitics** will echo the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia can and must contribute to disseminating universal democratic values and contribute to regional and international security, and we will contribute to these objectives through our analytical and intellectual inputs.

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



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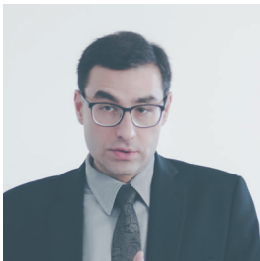
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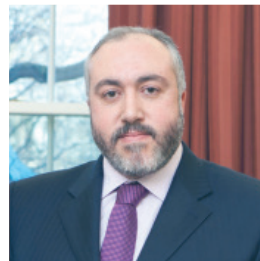
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Georgia in the European Tetris Game

Georgia steps into 2024 with a sense of anticipation and even jubilation, holding the newly awarded EU candidate status. This year marks a critical juncture as Georgia's future security and prosperity hinge on the EU's decision to initiate accession negotiations. Internally, Georgia faces the challenge of implementing rapid reforms ahead of crucial parliamentary elections. Externally, electoral outcomes in the EU, the US and Russia will significantly influence Georgia's path forward.

This collection of articles takes on Georgia's geopolitical challenges through the prisms of love, pragmatism, identity, diplomacy and regional security. This issue depicts Georgia grappling with its Euro-Atlantic destiny amid complex regional and domestic challenges.

Sergi Kapanadze paints the EU-Georgia relationship as a courtship that should be driven by values and shared democratic aspirations rather than only pragmatic geopolitics often dominating such discussions. Despite Georgia's modest size and complex geopolitical status, the EU's gesture of granting candidate status to the country symbolizes a commitment to these shared values. It must be Georgia's charm offensive, rooted in fast reforms and adherence to EU principles, that can boost its European integration. However, this union can only work if Georgia commits fully to the EU's requirements.

Jaba Devdariani then shifts the focus from the allure of European integration to the hard-nosed geopolitics of regional alliances. While cultural affinities and historical ties are beneficial, they are insufficient in the face of the realpolitik of regional security. Therefore, Georgia must and can offer more than its charm; it has the potential to serve as a hub of intelligence and communication, leveraging its strategic location, regional awareness and human resources to become a crucial point of knowledge for the EU.

Vano Chkhikvadze steps in with the analysis of Georgian public opinion, revealing the deep-rooted support for the EU among the population despite the government's often ambivalent actions and positions. Trust in the EU remains very high, even as government actions and rhetoric occasionally undermine this sentiment. The survey data underscores the dissonance between the Georgian people's pro-EU stance and the government's

actions, highlighting a potential for anti-Western propaganda to exploit this divide, particularly among ethnic minorities.

Thorniké Gordadze dives into the peculiar alliance between Georgia's government and Hungary's Viktor Orbán, a partnership that seems to counter Georgia's European aspirations given Mr Orbán's fraught relationship with the EU. But the strategic play behind this alignment is that it serves the Georgian Dream government's narrative that conservative and sovereigntist agendas are compatible with European values. Yet, this relationship risks alienating Georgia from the broader European community and could harm its European path.

Temuri Yakobashvili's perspective on 'alternative diplomacy' reveals how non-state actors, including political opposition, civil society and the business community, have stepped in to fill the void left by official diplomatic channels. This 'parallel diplomacy' underscores the disconnect between the Georgian government's foreign policy approach and the pro-Western orientation of its civil society which remains committed to Euro-Atlantic integration.

Lastly, Shota Gvineria zooms out to show NATO's security dynamics on its eastern flank, pointing out the stark differences in threat perception and security strategies between the northern and southern parts of Eastern Europe. Gvineria emphasizes the need for a comprehensive NATO strategy addressing security challenges across the eastern frontline, including allied and partner territories. The establishment of a clear roadmap for Ukraine and Georgia's accession to NATO is imperative for deterring Russia from further aggression.

The collective insights of these authors illuminate the intricate web of international relations - a dance of strategic interests, identity politics and popular will - all converging in Georgia's pursuit of a secure and integrated European future.

With respect,

Editorial Team

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All EU Needs Is Love

Only Georgia's Charm Offensive, Not Pragmatic Geopolitics, Can Have the EU Head over Heels

Welcome to the grand romantic drama of Georgia and the European Union – a tale where Georgia and the EU are courting each other, not through the sparkle of riches or the promise of might, but with the timeless allure of love.

The European Union's granting of candidate status to Georgia is akin to a diplomatic courtship, a promise ring foreshadowing a deeper bond.

The European Union's granting of candidate status to Georgia is akin to a diplomatic courtship, a promise ring foreshadowing a deeper bond. It is a gesture of commitment and potential unity, a prelude to a fuller integration, symbolizing

hope, shared aspirations, values and visions for a future.

This engagement heralds a period of preparation and alignment as Georgia embarks on the path to full European integration, embracing reforms and values that resonate with the EU's foundational principles.

Why, one might ponder, did the EU swipe right for Georgia? What treasures does this gutsy nation bring to the high-stakes matchmaking table of the EU?

If you are looking for the usual suspects – a mammoth market, a hefty wallet, a bastion of defense, a crossroads of commerce or the size of the country – think again.



Sergi Kapanadze
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With a population of 3.5 million, a GDP per capita of a humble USD 8,800 and a geopolitical ‘It’s complicated’ status, even Georgia’s most die-hard wingmen might stutter for a pitch. As for size, well, it does not matter.

In the grand chessboard of European politics, the savvy plays for EU enlargement have often echoed the power moves of ancient European nobility where the wooing was all about the size of the estate, the weight of the purse and the strength of the bloodline. Medieval courtships were a downright mercantile affair. Think less of hearts and flowers and more lands and towers.

But the winds of courtship have shifted, at least in Europe. In modern days, tying the knot is less about the size of the dowry and more about the butterflies in the belly – yes, we are talking about LOVE.

And is this notion of EU membership as a marital vow not quite apt? It is all about sharing the duvet of resources, the occasional squabble over which direction the family must steer but ultimately cuddling up in the shared bed of values and conjuring up dreams for future generations. It is true, parting ways is as messy as it gets – just whisper ‘Brexit’ for chills.

So, when one pops the question, “Why should the EU and Georgia be together?” – maybe it is time to ditch the abacus and the calculator. The real spark might just lie in the warmth of camaraderie, the clinking of democratic glasses and the slow dance of shared ideals – yes, LOVE.

As we wander through this semi-humorous but still pertinent narrative, we will not dare to nail down the definition of ‘love’ – that is a path many a brave soul from Camoes to Rustaveli has traversed with trembling hearts, and not entirely successfully.

Instead, we can still muse how to make the EU fall head over heels for Georgia. Maybe the magnetic pull Georgia must exert should not be in terms of corridors, security, economy and stability but values, democracy, human rights and identity.

Georgia should not be looking to be the EU’s rebound or a marriage of convenience. But rather a full-blown, sweep-you-off-your-feet epic romance.

Georgia should not be looking to be the EU’s rebound or a marriage of convenience. But rather a full-blown, sweep-you-off-your-feet epic romance. The lifelong partnership must be based on the sweet taste of democracy, the whispered tender vows of human rights and the shared collective European values. As Georgia and the EU

tango in the grand ballroom of geopolitics, Georgia should not just present pragmatic, rational arguments but rather pen down the love sonnets about “together is where we belong.”

The Marriage of True Minds

In the grand dance hall of European integration, where every step and twirl counts, the European Union has laid out a dance card for Georgia, a series of steps and gestures in the form of nine conditionalities. These are not just motions to be performed; they are an intimate waltz of values, a duet of shared beliefs and mutual trust.

The EU desires Georgia to craft a mosaic of honesty, safeguarding its media landscape from the misleading harmonies of external meddling and anti-Western factions. This is a vow to cleanse the communication channels, guaranteeing that the only echoes drifting through are filled with genuine and pro-western echoes. Similarly, regarding disinformation and propaganda, in a partnership as intimate as that of the EU and Georgia, it is only natural to anticipate a harmonious dialogue free from accusations of ensnaring one’s ally into unwarranted conflicts, particularly with Russia.

To harmonize with the EU, Georgia is prompted to fine-tune its foreign policies, reflecting the EU's diplomatic stance with other countries.

To harmonize with the EU, Georgia is prompted to fine-tune its foreign policies, reflecting the EU's diplomatic stance with other countries. It is about synchronizing foreign policy moves that embody a confluence of vision and reciprocal esteem. The EU's plea for Georgia to adopt a foreign policy that resonates with its own is a call for unity in perspective regarding the relations with neighbors, Russia, Ukraine, the observance of global human rights and the approach to other global and regional issues. Such an alignment transcends mere practicality; it is rooted in shared principles. Although Georgia may hold unique stances, especially concerning the non-recognition issues with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, when it concerns critiquing human rights practices in Russia, challenging authoritarian inclinations in surrounding regions or advocating for minority groups, the notion that practical concerns should overshadow values is untenable for the EU or a value-based marriage.

The EU holds the conviction that its ally should avoid radical rhetoric and should realign its domestic governance to reflect the democratic ideals of Europe.

In a dance, every participant must feel the rhythm. Georgia is asked to include all political parties and civil society in the choreography of legislation and domestic politics, especially those tunes that lead toward European integration. The prosaic name for this conditionality is depolarization. It is an invitation to a harmonious assembly where the diverse expressions of the populace contribute to the democratic pulse. The EU holds the conviction that its ally should avoid radical rhetoric and should realign its domestic governance to reflect the democratic ideals of Europe.

Marginalizing opposing viewpoints, denouncing critics as traitors and repressing opposition through force starkly contradict the shared vows of European unity.

Thus, for Georgia and the EU to remain engaged, the 2024 parliamentary elections must be held according to the highest standards.

For the EU, democracy needs free and fair elections where every vote counts. By refining its electoral process and following EU and OSCE recommendations, Georgia is requested that the elections rightly capture the will of its people which means lowering the electoral barrier and allowing migrant Georgians to vote. Traditional problems with Georgian elections, such as vote-buying, fraud and violence, have

nothing in common with European values. Thus, for Georgia and the EU to remain engaged, the 2024 parliamentary elections must be held according to the highest standards.

The EU also would like to see Georgian democratic institutions perform in tune. Like a conductor ensuring every instrument plays its part, Georgia is asked to enhance its parliamentary oversight, letting each branch of government perform its solo flawlessly. This includes ensuring the autonomy and impartiality of critical institutions and harmonizing the melody of governance. Previous perils, such as ostracizing the opposition and having a rubberstamp parliament, where no real debate takes place and only opponents are downgraded, are as far from European values and practices as they get. So is the inclination to control the independent regulators and the Central Bank – the rules from the EU playbook that go back to the 1990s.

For the EU, the judiciary is the backbone of fairness and Georgia is tasked with sculpting it according to the highest standards. By adopting comprehensive reforms, Georgia is expected to ensure that justice is delivered with integrity and by independent courts. This is a mammoth task for Georgia, requiring the fundamental reform of the High Council of Justice.

In the grand orchestra of European gov-

ernance, where every instrument's timbre contributes to the collective opus, corruption strikes a jarring chord, threatening to spoil the concerto. Georgia is tasked with meticulously tuning its institutional ensemble, ensuring that each section plays in key, unsullied by the dissonant clang of corruption. This noble pursuit calls for relentlessly refining the state's apparatus, a commitment to silencing the persistent hum of high-level corruption and establishing stalwart, independent agencies that stand as vigilant conductors, ensuring that every note of governance rings clear and true. In this endeavor, pretending and window-dressing – favorite dance moves for the current government, can no longer suffice.

The kind of intimate relations that the EU and Georgia have established since December requires full transparency and predictability. For this reason, Georgia is beckoned to the task of deoligarchization, a sweeping motion to cleanse the dance floor of any lingering whispers of undue influence. It is a resolute stride towards a ball where the music of democracy plays freely, where each step and turn is made in the light and the embrace of the dance is open to all, uninhibited by the grasp of concealed hands of puppet masters.

At the heart of this Georgian-European alliance beats a deep reverence for the sanctity of human rights and respect for civil society. Georgia is asked to be the

guardian of these rights to ensure that the halls of assembly are filled with voices that can speak without fear. It is the creation of a sanctuary where each actor is cherished, every opinion is heard and individuality can flourish in the safety of shared respect and liberty. Free media, strong civil society and a civilized European attitude from the Government toward them are what the EU wants to see from its lifelong partner.

As Georgia rises to meet these challenges, it is not merely ticking off tasks on a pragmatic agenda. It is entering into a rhapsodic courtship with the European Union where each conditionality is a verse of a profound love ballad about democracy and collective unity. These steps are more than mere movements; they are the strides on a path paved with shared principles. In unison, Georgia and the EU are not just participants in a transient waltz but co-authors of an epic saga of camaraderie, a love story to inspire future generations.

Prosaic Conclusion

The EU and Georgia can only have a common future if they truly share common values and identity.

On a serious note, all this means that the EU and Georgia can only have a common future if they truly share common values

and identity. The EU-Georgian romance was given a chance by the EU because of geopolitics, not because of love, except for maybe Georgian cuisine. However, for Georgia to only count on *khachapuri* and *khinkali* in the future would not be wise, just like counting on another episode of geopolitical credit would be an illusion.

The only chance this union could work is if the Government of Georgia takes the EU requirements seriously and delivers on them fully in the remaining few months. Furthermore, the EU must see that these reforms are genuine, not shallow or simply for presentation purposes. The next steps in EU-Georgia relations are about opening the accession talks and then opening and closing extremely challenging and complex 30-plus chapters, requiring the transposition of the EU acquis. But most importantly, the EU must have no doubts about Georgian democracy, values and allegiances.

Whether the current Georgian Government can make this transformation happen is anybody's guess. So far, the game that the Georgian Dream played was about maintaining power, window-dressing the reforms, counting on geopolitics and keeping its fingers crossed that this strategy worked. This was far from LOVE.

The EU can no longer close its eyes to half-baked reforms, empty promises, inconsequential action plans and anti-Western actions and rhetoric from the Georgian Dream.

But, as in any relationship, both sides bear responsibility for the success of future co-existence. The EU can no longer close its eyes to half-baked reforms, empty promises, inconsequential action plans and anti-Western actions and rhetoric from the Georgian Dream. The EU must also make it clear to the highly pro-European Georgian population that the next next step - accession negotiations, is within reach only if the prescribed reforms are genuinely implemented. The EU must also ensure that the interim assessment of the nine conditionalities is published before the 2024 parliamentary elections so that the Georgian public knows what to expect from the current government or other possible alternatives.

The LOVE between the Georgian public and the EU is almost unconditional. However, for the EU to reciprocate, Georgia must use its charm offensive; that is, do everything it is asked to and more. Only in such a case will the EU take relations with Georgia seriously, basing its feelings on genuine emotions of love and respect and not just simple, pragmatic, short-term geopolitical and strategic considerations.■

Lining Georgia's Dowry: Intelligence and Communication

Our editor has been rightly extolling the virtues of love in international affairs. True, the feeling of civilizational, cultural, or other affinities is beneficial in forging regional alliances. For a small and vulnerable nation, being perceived as a part of something larger is a boon – like those fish who puff themselves up when in danger, it helps project strength against predatory neighbors.

But to borrow the wisdom of the immortal Marilyn Monroe, we all lose our (cultural) charms in the end, especially when the going gets tough in the neighborhood. And there may come a time when a state needs a lawyer or a protector of some sort. And at that point, the homegrown diamonds – the sort that harden under pressure – are the (small) state's best friend.



Lucas Cranach, The Procuress (1548).

Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts, Tbilisi



Jaba Devdariani
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Georgia's latest [foreign policy strategy](#) (it expired in 2022) considers joining the EU and NATO as key elements to protect the country's sovereignty and restore its territorial integrity. It also says that these tasks should be served by consolidating democracy, ensuring sustainable economic development, and nurturing the country's good image abroad.

But, as you might have guessed, this article is about a calculated geopolitical marriage of interest. Getting under the EU's economic and NATO security umbrella would be grand. But there are no free lunches in foreign policy. Why should the world's richest but increasingly stressed economies and democracies want to let Georgia in and assume the cost?

This article ponders generating the kind of dowry that might entice neighbors and friends without triggering an instinctive grab at the jugular from its neighbors. But how could that dowry chest be best lined?

Passing Rights

Georgia is no stranger to exploiting whatever little it has as a geopolitical advantage. It was Eduard Shevardnadze who grabbed the maxim that it is all about location, location, location and ran away with it. Building the corridor for Central Asian and Azerbaijani oil and gas to get to the Western markets has been the insurance policy that Georgia bought early. Since

successive governments touted Georgia as a "corridor" of all sorts – the "[Middle Corridor](#)" connectivity and the passage of "green" [undersea power cable](#) to Europe from Azerbaijan are just the latest reiterations of this tried-and-tested approach.

Corridors that are securely under unified military guard tend to attract aggressors like flies.

But corridors come with some nasty small print. First, it is always more profitable for one entity to control the whole transportation corridor end-to-end. The famous *Pax Romana* was also an economic phenomenon as it was much more convenient for the Mongols to trade with the Venetians in Great Novgorod rather than on the border somewhere closer to home. This is to say, corridors that are securely under unified military guard tend to attract aggressors like flies. Georgia has learned this to its peril when the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline ended just meters from the Russian occupation line.

Secondly, the corridors need to function under unified trade and customs rules to be profitable, and one country is always better at doing that than a plethora of them. For this reason, Russia remained a preferable transportation route from Central Asia to Europe right up to the moment when it launched itself headlong into an act of military aggression unprecedented in modern Europe for its scale. The ben-

efits that Georgia could – theoretically – reap from the shutdown of that transportation route are certainly temporary. This does not mean it does not warrant to be explored – but one cannot bet one’s long-term security on it.

Georgia is perhaps quite well-located but still a tiny segment of any regional or global trade route that may emerge.

Thirdly, Georgia is perhaps quite well-located but still a tiny segment of any regional or global trade route that may emerge. It has the Black Sea at the western end, which is a bit of an obstacle for smooth and unimpeded trade. For the route to work, the entities located at the sending and receiving ends of the corridor must want to trade with one another and – preferably for Georgia’s development – legally. Georgia’s neighborhood has historically been full of neighbors being nasty to each other, and a brief look at the news suggests that this is not about to change. So, any transport route risks being easily relocated, cut off, or going down when and if conflicts flare.

In other ways, anything Georgia could generate from transit is welcome, but it can only bring limited and fragile cash. If used wisely, the income could (and should) be invested elsewhere towards a more prospective opportunity.

This understanding has brought a new word into Georgian foreign policy vocabulary, which has been repeated ad nauseam. Georgia [should become “a hub,”](#) they insist. In the standard version, the talk is of the “logistics hub,” a sort of Amazon warehouse for storing and dispatching the goods. In a most exotic iteration, President Salome Zurbishvili once said her country should become [“a hub for religious tourism.”](#) But perhaps let us not hinge our hopes on the pilgrims on the *Chemins de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle* punching in the new itinerary into their trusty navigation devices.

On the surface, being a “hub” has a significant economic advantage to being just “a corridor.” The idea is that various countries trade through you and use your territory to store and process the goods they trade. This may bring in more money, but as anyone stuck in a Tbilisi traffic jam or waiting for the coffee shop to open at 10 am only to realize it does not have any coffee will tell you, logistics are not the professional forte in these parts. Neither does being a “hub” increase your security foreign policy-wise – an add-on bonus to the “corridor,” it suffers from the very same problems. The only advantage is that the costs sunk into developing the reprocessing infrastructure may encourage the partners to care for your security more. But given that the Georgian government intends to bear the investment costs largely, that argument is moot.

It Is What You Do (And the Way That You Do It)

Yet, there is another way to look at the benefits that Georgia's location provides. Yes, hydrocarbons and energy matter, but the world is increasingly about intangibles: services, knowledge, intelligence, and communications. Here, Georgia may excel in a way that makes it a better partner for influential clubs and boosts its standing and security. But to do that, foreign policy thinkers must turn their wary eye away from the drawing boards with pretty (and scary) arrows and look at the most important asset any country has – its people.

The highly networked international crime has fewer prejudices about race, nationality, and religion than the state actors do, and it is (sadly) often first to spot a good business opportunity. And in our affair, too, the unlikely and, honestly, quite unwelcome success of the [call-centers](#) business in Georgia holds an important clue.

Thousands (nobody is sure about the exact numbers) of Georgian youths have apparently been engaged by shadowy actors to call up the European pensionaries and entice them into dubious investment schemes. The international crackdown led by Eurojust – a pan-European prosecutors' hub – brought one such network down, but word of mouth is that others are working, some pursuing more above-

the-board practices.

One notices three important elements in this unfortunate affair: first, Georgian youth apparently speak the European languages well enough to do the job. Second, access to the European markets gives advantages. And third, if intelligence is harnessed, the technology allows it to be successfully up-scaled.

We could easily transpose these elements and make them work for Georgia's foreign policy objectives. If the country wants to join the Euro-Atlantic security alliance, it can bring something very important to the table. Georgia's immediate neighborhood is now a neuralgic point of international security. The Middle East and Eastern Europe – both within arm's reach from Georgia are on fire. The frictions with Türkiye impede the European Union's effectiveness and the US's ability to project power in the region. Iran is a significant regional spoiler. The EU and the US try to play a stabilizing role between Armenia and Azerbaijan but often lack context that undermines their effectiveness.

If Georgia were to play its cards well, it has what is required to become a crucial point of generating knowledge and intelligence in the wider region.

If Georgia were to play its cards well, it has what is required to become a crucial

point of generating knowledge and intelligence in the wider region. The country has fluent, and often native, speakers of the Armenian, Azerbaijani, Hebrew, Persian, Russian, and Turkish languages, on top of more than passable fluency in English and other European languages. Living alongside neighbors gives insight into their preferences and *modus operandi*, which is more than just language.

Georgia could become a host – indeed, a “hub” – for generating knowledge on a regional level and facilitating the transfer of this knowledge to the decision-makers in the European and Euro-Atlantic sphere.

With this unique competitive advantage, Georgia could become a host – indeed, a “hub” – for generating knowledge on a regional level and facilitating the transfer of this knowledge to the decision-makers in the European and Euro-Atlantic sphere: in academia, media, and among government actors. Georgia already has a plethora of public and private universities which started to generate quality outputs and position themselves internationally. With a relatively modest investment and a long-term vision, they could become a vibrant basis that would help our partners to know and – importantly – understand the context in the region, which is now being (re)shaped by dramatic and tragic events that are likely to affect the foreign

policy calculus for the decades to come.

Soft power diplomacy and serving as a venue for international dialogue has traditionally been the vein where small states could punch above their geopolitical weight. Just as confrontations in our region mount, the actors need more neutral venues to hobnob both formally and informally. That has been happening in Tbilisi and Georgia’s resorts for years. The time might have come to make it a national foreign policy brand.

The advantage of such a dowry is its uniqueness – it is what you do, it is how you do it, and only Georgia could do it at a scale while being located in the region.

Not So Fast

Obviously, it is easier said than done. In recent decades, Georgia’s foreign policy has been [self-centered](#), not to say self-absorbed. The existential security threat presented by the persisting occupation of its two provinces by Russia has cowed Tbilisi into accommodation towards the Kremlin and narrowed down its foreign policy agenda. Georgia has been asking things from its friends and partners, and after its military participation in Afghanistan ended, giving back very little in return.

To become a contributor to international security again, not only with brawn but

now increasingly with brains, Georgia needs to free itself from this self-imposed paralysis and start thinking about common needs as the true allies do. In this way, it will enhance its own security without undermining the precarious balance of nurtured friendships in the neighborhood.

Georgia has had one of the highest enrollment rates in the top US universities through various academic programs sponsored by the United States, akin to the famous Fulbright Scholarship.

Investment in knowledge infrastructure and human capital is also crucial. Georgia has had one of the highest enrollment rates in the top US universities through various academic programs sponsored by the United States, akin to the famous Fulbright Scholarship. Georgian students are also ardent consumers of the opportunities to study in Europe under Erasmus+ exchange programs. Sadly, and in a reversal of the trend present in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many more young professionals have been deciding to stay abroad. Harnessing their capital of knowledge and contacts, establishing standing partnerships with European and US think tanks, and convincing them to use Georgia for their field research could bring these people back and form the backbone of academia and foreign service.

Georgia needs to invest in and reinvigorate the once-famous academic institutions known for teaching the mastery of regional languages in order to upgrade and sustain a linguistic and cultural cutting edge.

Finally, to convert all of these into foreign policy “brownie points,” Georgia’s foreign service must (re)gain its standing within Georgia’s civil service, its penchant for excellence, and the respect of its partners.

All of this is a tall order, requiring vision and dedication. But it can be done. And who would not want the bride bringing that kind of intricate dowry?!

Servabo Fidem

Dissecting the Georgian Population's High Support for the EU

On December 15, 2023, the European Council decided to award Georgia the status of an EU candidate state. This announcement sparked widespread celebrations in Tbilisi's streets and across Georgian social media. The Georgian public, eagerly anticipating this development, played a crucial role in influencing the EU's decision. The EU institutions were swayed more by the strong pro-EU sentiment among the Georgian populace than by the government's implementation of reforms.

A resounding 77% of Georgian citizens would vote to join the EU if given the chance in a referendum.

To understand this pro-European senti-

ment of Georgians, we will examine the findings of a public opinion [survey](#) conducted by the Europe Foundation between March and May 2023. Similar to earlier surveys, this recent poll reveals that a resounding 77% of Georgian citizens would vote to join the EU if given the chance in a referendum. Since 2009, this popular support has consistently stayed above 61%, with opposition peaking at a mere 11% in 2015.

The European Union took notice of Georgia's fervent support for EU membership during its first-ever [evaluation](#) of the country as part of the EU enlargement process. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [highlighted](#) the strong backing of the Georgian population for the



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EU in her statement. She affirmed that the European Commission “fully supports the genuine aspirations of the overwhelming majority of its citizens to join the European Union. These aspirations need to be better mirrored by the authorities who should engage more with the opposition and civil society on matters of national interests.”

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, also expressed similar views. Mr Borrell tweeted on the X platform that “the Georgian people have shown their unshaken commitment to European values many times.”

52% of Georgians believe EU membership would enhance their economic situation.

Survey results show that 52% of Georgians believe EU membership would enhance their economic situation, while 25% think being part of the EU would offer better protection against external threats. Regarding obstacles, one in three Georgians sees political instability within the country as the primary hurdle to joining the EU. The second significant challenge is perceived to be Georgia’s occupied territories, followed by a lack of political will from the national government to join the EU, with Russia being the fourth concern.

Trust Toward the EU Increased...

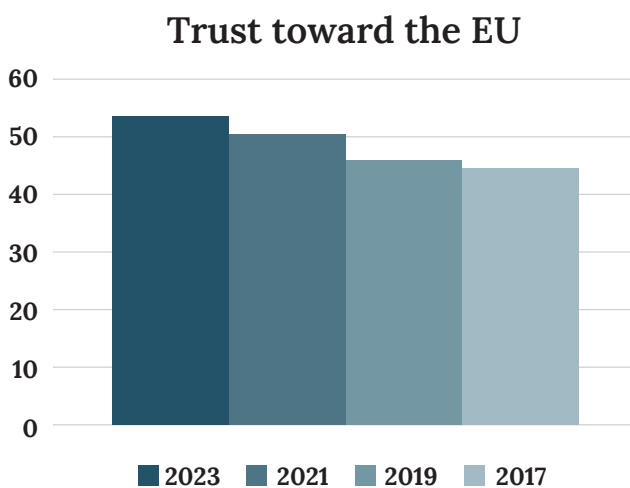
Trust in the European Union has grown in Georgia, mirroring the public sentiment as the country moves closer to the EU. Since the initiation of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2013, the percentage of Georgians with positive or somewhat positive views of the EU rose from 36% to 54% by the autumn of 2023. Georgian society appears to have responded to the ruling party’s manipulation and interference against the EU and its values and verbal assaults on EU institutions and officials. Consequently, the proportion of the public perceiving EU-Georgia relations as excellent decreased from 48% in 2011 to 21% in 2023, while those considering the relationship bad in some way grew from a mere 1% in 2011 to 12% in 2023.

Despite attempts by the ruling Georgian Dream party and the People’s Power political group to undermine EU trust, public confidence in the EU has not wavered. In fact, it has strengthened: from 44% in 2017 who trusted the EU fully or partially, the number climbed to 53% in 2023. Remarkably, the EU often enjoys greater trust than various domestic institutions, including the Georgian government (34%), the healthcare system (42%), courts (39%), the police (51%), the President’s office (20%) and the office of the Public Defend-

er (26%). Regarding barriers to Georgia's EU membership, an increasing number of people believe the primary obstacle is the Georgian government's lack of political will. This belief surged from 6% in 2013 to 23% in 2023.

A 2021 survey revealed that most Georgians considered the EU a threat to Georgian traditions.

This high level of trust poses a challenge for the EU as sustaining trust requires ongoing effort. One must not forget that a 2021 [survey](#) revealed that most Georgians considered the EU a threat to Georgian traditions. However, only 35% of those with higher education concurred or strongly concurred with this view, and only one-third of young adults aged 18 to 34 also shared this sentiment. These attitudes provide a potential base for anti-Western propaganda efforts and also showcase how fragile the increasing trust toward the EU could be.



Source: Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward the EU in Georgia – 2023 Survey Results

But the Ethnic Minorities Think Differently

Conversely, enthusiasm for the European Union among Georgia's ethnic minorities has waned. As per the latest national census in 2014, Azerbaijanis and Armenians constitute the largest national minority groups in Georgia, making up 6.27% and 4.53% of the total population of 3.7 million, respectively. Surveys indicate a decline in support for Georgia's EU membership among these minority groups, dropping from 52% in 2021 to 43% in 2023. Simultaneously, the percentage of ethnic minorities opposing Georgia's accession to the EU in a potential referendum rose from 6% to 15%.

Despite this, Georgia's ethnic minority groups still favor EU membership over joining the Russia-initiated Eurasian Union. However, the preference for the Eurasian Union has grown within these communities, increasing from 28% in 2021 to 33% in 2023. Concurrently, opposition to joining the Eurasian Union among these groups declined from 22% in 2021 to 17% in 2023.

The decreased support for Georgia's EU integration among ethnic minorities may be attributed to language barriers, especially among the older population, which does not speak Georgian and relies on Russian television for news. Ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis residing in Geor-

Georgia predominantly [get](#) political news from Russian TV channels. Channel One Russia is the most popular of these channels, with Russia Today and Rossiya also widely viewed. These channels frequently portray the internal conflict in Ukraine and its ambitions to join the EU and NATO as the primary causes of the war with Russia.

It is difficult to overlook that the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, echoed a similar sentiment at the Global Security Forum (GLOBSEC) in May 2023. Addressing the motivations behind Russia's hostilities against Ukraine, he [suggested](#) that "one of the reasons was Ukraine's will and determination to become a member of NATO. Therefore, we see the consequence."

The growing disenchantment with the EU among ethnic minorities in Georgia might also be influenced by the Georgian government's narrative that leverages the trauma from the 2008 war with Russia.

The growing disenchantment with the EU among ethnic minorities in Georgia might also be influenced by the Georgian government's narrative that leverages the trauma from the 2008 war with Russia. The narrative that the "global war party," which includes the EU, is pulling Georgia towards a conflict with Russia had its impact. Consequently, the percentage of Georgians who feel that deepening ties with the European Union would adversely affect Georgia-Russia relations rose from 20% in 2021 to 28% in 2023.

People vs Government on Russia and China

Amid concerns about Russia, Georgian society prioritizes bolstering economic relations with the European Union more than with any other nation or trading bloc. Survey results [show](#) that 63% of Georgians favor the strongest economic ties with the EU, with the United States ranking second at 46% preference and Turkey third at 35%.

Support towards Georgia having the closest economic cooperation with ... %

	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
EU	48	54	56	43	48	47	59	63
Russia	53	50	68	56	54	39	35	21
China	3	13	3	7	6	7	5	9

[Source:](#) Knowledge of and Attitudes Towards the EU in Georgia; 2023 Survey Results; Europe Foundation

While only a small fraction of the population, 9%, is in favor of Georgia forming a close relationship with China, Georgian officials went ahead and [signed](#) a declaration in 2023 to initiate a strategic partnership with China. This move followed the earlier [signing](#) of a free trade agreement with China in 2017.

In a similar vein, even though public backing for enhanced trade and economic relations with Russia is waning, the Georgian Dream has persisted in fostering economic and trade connections with Russia. In 2013, a higher number of Georgians (68%) supported closer economic ties with Russia over the European Union (56%). By 2023, this support for closer economic ties with Russia had plummeted from 68% to just 21%, while the endorsement for more engagement with the EU rose to 63%. In a move that goes against the preferences of the Georgian populace, the proportion of Georgia's total exports going to Russia [increased](#) from 2% in 2012 to 11.7% in 2022. Moreover, the Georgian government's decision to resume direct flights with Russia led to the EU [issuing](#) a formal protest to the Georgian administration.

EU Benefits and Public Perceptions

Georgia stands out as the only country in the region to benefit from visa-free access to the European Union beginning in 2017.

Georgia stands out as the only country in the region to benefit from visa-free access to the European Union beginning in 2017, a move anticipated to enhance its citizens' familiarity with the EU. This expectation was only somewhat met as 680,000 Georgians visited EU and Schengen countries within the last five years. A significant 80% of the population reports they have not set foot in any EU member state, and [62%](#) of the youth between 14 and 29 years of age have never traveled internationally, suggesting that not all Georgians fully utilize the advantages of visa-free travel.

Maintaining visa-free travel status is a strategic objective of Georgia's foreign policy, and considerable efforts have been made to prevent the activation of the EU's visa liberalization suspension mechanism, which has been a topic of [discussion](#) in

Support towards Georgia having the closest political cooperation with ... %

	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
EU	64	66	65	49	54	53	61	64
Russia	54	47	65	54	50	41	31	20

[Source:](#) Knowledge of and Attitudes Towards the EU in Georgia; 2023 Survey Results; Europe Foundation

recent times. However, data [indicates](#) a misuse of the visa-free privilege, with Georgian asylum applications jumping from 14,630 in 2021 to 26,450 in 2022. The EU and certain member countries have urged Georgia to initiate an extensive informational campaign on visa-free travel rules. In response, Georgian authorities have employed various communication strategies to educate the public. Surveys reveal that awareness of visa-free travel requirements is still lacking: in 2017, only a quarter of Georgians thought visa-free travel granted them work rights in the EU, but by 2023, this misconception rose to 57%. Almost half of the Georgian population seeks more details on the European Union, particularly regarding EU-Georgia trade relations and educational opportunities for Georgian students.

The EU Must Work on Its Image, but Not among the Youth

Surveys indicate that the European Union could enhance its promotional efforts in Georgia as the Georgian public is largely unaware of the EU's contributions to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the region. The role of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), established in Georgia following the 2008 war with Russia, is not well known; nearly 50% of Georgians are unclear about the EUMM's activities, while 25% mistakenly think its purpose is to aid Georgia in

adopting democratic and economic market reforms.

27% of the population suspects that European aid primarily benefits government officials and politicians.

Additionally, the EU must strengthen its communication about its support to Georgia. The EU, along with the United States, stands as one of Georgia's largest benefactors. From 2021 to 2024, the EU will [contribute](#) EUR 340 million to the country. Nevertheless, a quarter of Georgians (26%) are keen to learn more about the distribution of EU funds. Moreover, 27% of the population suspects that European aid primarily benefits government officials and politicians.

A vast majority of the Georgian youth supports European integration.

Georgia has greatly benefited from the International Credit Mobility and Erasmus+ programs with 6,509 Georgian students studying in universities across EU member states between 2015 and 2020. This may have influenced the perception that 22% of EU assistance benefits students. A vast majority of the Georgian youth supports European integration, with 79% [viewing](#) the EU's role in their country positively. Young Georgians are also more resistant to anti-Western propaganda with

Georgia's cooperation with which of the following countries will threaten national values?

Russia	72%
EU	8%
Turkey	8%
USA	6%
Iran	6%
Azerbaijan	4%
Armenia	4%

[Source:](#) Youth Study Generation of Independent Georgia: In Between Hopes and Uncertainties; Friedrich Ebert Foundation; 2023

only 8% concerned that cooperation with the EU could endanger national values as compared to [37%](#) of the general population holding this concern.

A mere 1% of young Georgians view Russia as a close ally, while a significant majority, 72%, perceive Russia as the primary danger to their national values.

A mere 1% of young Georgians view Russia as a close ally, while a significant majority, 72%, perceive Russia as the primary danger to their national values. The youth in Georgia largely hold favorable views of the European Union, with 45% associating it with the rule of law and democratic principles and 38% recognizing it as a center of cultural and scientific progress. Furthermore, two-thirds of the young population in Georgia (66%) consider the collapse of the Soviet Union to have been beneficial for their country.

Succisa Virescit

Recent surveys in Georgia reveal that despite the Georgian government's attempts to mislead its citizens and distort European values, trust in the European Union has significantly increased, especially among the youth. They consider the EU a positive influence and consider Russia, not the EU, a threat to Georgian national values. This sentiment led to active opposition in March 2023, mainly by Generation Z, against the Russian-influenced foreign agents' law proposed by the Georgian authorities.

The general confidence in the EU often surpasses the trust towards the Georgian state institutions. Steady public support for Georgia's EU membership remains high, with a 77% approval rate. The main reasons for wanting to join the EU are security and social welfare. However, ethnic minorities, constituting about 11% of the population, are more susceptible to an-

ti-Western propaganda due to language barriers and reliance on Russian TV for information, which frequently accuses the EU and the West of instigating the conflict with Russia in Ukraine.

There is a notable demand for more information on Georgia's EU integration process and its advantages. The EU must also intensify its efforts to inform Georgian citizens about peacebuilding activities.

Considering that every third citizen of Georgia supports the statement that the EU represents a threat to Georgian tradition, more needs to be done in this direction. The EU and civil society organizations have to plan and implement creative campaigns to convince Georgians that this is compatible with keeping the EU path and preserving traditions simultaneously. Leaving this behind might lead to anti-Western forces using it against Georgia's will to join the EU. There is also a risk that they might play with the territorial integrity of Georgia, causing its citizens to make an artificial choice between EU accession and territorial integrity.

The Georgian Government's Hungarian Rhapsody

Understanding the Romance between Tbilisi and Budapest

“Georgia is fine. We all love you here!” - Viktor Orbán reassured Georgian journalists waiting for the final decision on the EU candidate status outside the EU Council meeting on December 14, 2023.

The Hungarian Prime Minister was the only EU leader who unconditionally supported Georgia's accession to the EU. But given Mr Orbán's reputation, his advocacy for Georgia's accession looked like the rope's support of a hanged man.

In the end, however, the European Council confirmed the European Commission's geopolitically motivated recommendations of November 8 and granted Georgia

the long-awaited EU Candidate Status, notwithstanding Viktor Orbán's efforts. In fact, Mr Orbán tried to veto the European Council's decisions, particularly on Ukraine's financial aid and accession negotiations with the EU, thus jeopardizing not only Ukrainian but also Moldovan and Georgian chances to advance on the EU track.

The Georgian government's choice of Hungary's Viktor Orbán as its primary, if not sole, ally and lobbyist in the EU may seem curious. Indeed, given his isolation within the European Union and the *cordon sanitaire* around him, this choice looks counterproductive and irrational.



Thorniké Gordadze
Contributor

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



The Georgian Dream government is playing a double game, caught between a broadly pro-European public opinion and the interests of its increasingly explicit pro - Russian leadership.

However, the Georgian government's European strategy is anything but simple and linear. The Georgian Dream government is playing a double game, caught between a broadly pro-European public opinion and the interests of its increasingly explicit pro-Russian leadership.

To stay in power, the Georgian Dream has to reassure public opinion that the country is moving toward the European Union – the reason why the Georgian Dream needed the EU Candidate Status so much. On the other hand, the Georgian government does not aspire to genuine integration and reforms requested by the EU – the reason why Georgia-EU relations are framed exclusively in terms of defending the country's national identity and pride. And this is where Viktor Orbán's support comes in – as a testament that such ideological positioning is not uncommon within the EU and, therefore, not contrary to the popular desire to join it.

Yet, as time passes, rhetorical and diplomatic conflicts with Brussels and their instrumentalization by the Georgian government's propaganda machine risk negatively affecting the Georgian population's

enthusiasm for the EU, a path traveled by several Western Balkan states. Viktor Orbán is the linchpin of this strategy of ambiguity.

There is something in this game for Mr Orbán as well. Georgia and its current government offer many advantages for his strategy of political-ideological crusade against Brussels. This romance, therefore, is neither accidental nor surprising.

Georgia on Orbán's Mind: a Good Match

Viktor Orbán has positioned himself as the leader of the new ideological movement, Illiberal Democracy, challenging the notion that modern European democracy must inherently adhere to liberal ideology. He suggests that Europe should prioritize ethnic patriotism and national sovereignty and adjust democratic frameworks accordingly. To gain the clout of international respectability for these ideas, Budapest has channeled considerable efforts into forging ties with various political entities across Europe as well as with ultra-conservative and alt-right factions within the United States. Mr Orbán's ideological outlook is closely aligned with Russia's and has steered Hungary's foreign policy to converge with Moscow. Given the Georgian Dream's vocal critique of liberalism and its policies of conciliation towards Russia, Viktor Orbán's interest in Georgia is natural and also pragmatic.

Despite similarities, attitude towards the EU distinguishes Viktor Orbán from far-right leaders of Western European countries such as Geert Wilders or Marine Le Pen. Almost all the right-wing populist parties of “old Europe” are rigorously against EU enlargement, viewing it as a threat to prosperity and, in some cases, even favoring their country’s exit from the EU. Mr Orbán, in contrast, staunchly opposes the idea of “Huxit” and even favors welcoming new – preferably ideologically like-minded – members. Instead of leaving the EU, he would rather change it from within and make the EU a club of “sovereign” illiberal nations, a development which the Kremlin would only welcome.

But this strategy can only be viable if more countries who share Viktor Orbán’s values and stance on national sovereignty, minority rights, the rule of law, and freedom of expression are either members of the EU or closely associated with it.

Mr Orbán built friendships with nationalist, pro-Russian, and anti-Western leaders such as Serbia’s Aleksandar Vučić, North Macedonia’s former PM Nikola Gruevski, and the Republika Srpska’s Milorad Dodik. His overtures with Slovakia’s new Prime Minister, Robert Fico, and tandem with Türkiye’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are also testaments to his true priorities.

Viktor Orbán and other like-minded illiberal rulers see the current configuration of the EU as the immediate threat to the survival of their regimes.

Viktor Orbán and other like-minded illiberal rulers see the current configuration of the EU as the immediate threat to the survival of their regimes. Gaining allies around the Council’s table will help him defuse the pressure from the EU. With Robert Fico currently being the only possible ally at the European Council, Mr Orbán expects to see more peers soon. Therefore, inside the EU, he bets on the Rassemblement National of France, La Lega in Italy, the Dutch PVV, the Czech Freedom and Democracy party, and other similar groups. Outside the EU, he bets on the countries with socio-culturally conservative and radical right governments, like Serbia. Mr Orbán supports Bidzina Ivanishvili’s Georgian Dream from the same playbook of building the “Illiberal International.”

For similar reasons, he wants Ukraine away from the EU and bogged down in an impasse, blocking Brussels’s efforts to deliver military and financial aid to Kyiv. A conclusive victory for Kyiv would be a triumph of liberal solidarity and, therefore, damaging to Mr Orbán’s national and international political project.

The year 2024 is a crucial one for Viktor Orbán. Donald Trump's return to power could give him and his allies an ascendant position in European and international politics. But before that, there are European Parliament elections in May 2024, which traditionally favor center-right and center-left parties. The success of illiberal parties in the Europe-wide elections could also boost Mr Orbán's European stance.

However, the international influence and hopes for grandeur are only one facet of Viktor Orbán's rule, which is subordinate to the critical task of retaining power. The ideology of Christian ultra-conservatism, instead of security considerations, re-emerges as a glue to galvanize voters and build international alliances. But as the lines between the national interests and the interests of Hungary's ruling party, Fidesz, become blurred, this ideological mantle is just a cover for political pragmatism for the Hungarian Prime Minister, retaining power and wealth.

Here, too, Budapest and Tbilisi are on the same page. In the case of Viktor Orbán and Fidesz, as in the case of Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream, ideology is instrumental for financial security and the regime's survival. Neither the Georgian Dream nor Fidesz were initially far-right parties. Until 2023, the Georgian Dream was part of the Socialist International and affiliated with the Party of European Socialists (PES). Just a few months before the

great leap to the far right-wing identitarian parties, the Georgian Dream's General Secretary Irakli Kobakhidze was literally begging European center-left leaders like Olaf Scholtz for selfies at the European Socialist Congresses so that he could proudly post them on social networks. Similarly, Fidesz was a long-time member of the EPP (the European family of center-right parties) before being excluded and realigning with European far-right parties. Thus, the choices of both parties for the "defense of traditional values and Christianity" appear highly instrumental and tactical.

During his three-day official trip to Georgia in October 2023, which included numerous visits to churches and monasteries and joint prayers with bishops close to the government, Viktor Orbán passionately endorsed the main postulates of the Georgian Dream narrative. He supported Georgia's candidate status and described the EU's conditionality and past decisions concerning Georgia as "immoral and unfair." He repeatedly [praised](#) "Georgia's unwavering commitment to preserving the Christian heritage" and noted that Georgia's Prime Minister "not only advocates for family values but also embodies them." The parties have signed several documents and memoranda on cooperation, including in the "protection of families" field. At the end of this visit, the leaders temporarily dropped spiritual communion to talk about more earthly matters such

as energy transit (the Black Sea Strategic Submarine Electric Cable) and investment opportunities for Hungarian businesses whose very significant part happen to be supporters of Mr Orbán and Fidesz.

Georgia now appears to showcase Viktor Orbán's foreign policy because it contains all the elements of his influence and network-building strategy. Since his return to power in 2010, the intellectuals close to the regime started to [promote](#) the idea of Hungary being a Eurasian country, "not the east of Europe but the west of Asia." Georgia also fits well in this narrative.

Using Viktor Orbán for Domestic Georgian Consumption

For Georgia's ruling party, having Viktor Orbán in the EU is a gift from heaven, an excellent alibi proving that the ultra-conservative, sovereigntist agenda is compatible with Europe.

For Georgia's ruling party, having Viktor Orbán in the EU is a gift from heaven, an excellent alibi proving that the ultra-conservative, sovereigntist agenda is compatible with Europe. In the months and weeks preceding the European Council's decision, the Georgian Dream's propaganda media channels were actively projecting the narrative that "Mr Viktor," as Georgia's Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili calls

him, would block any decision by the 27 member states if Georgia was not granted the EU candidate status.

This conscious lie was intended to reinforce the idea that Viktor Orbán was the country's only true friend, capable of heroic solo efforts for Georgia's sake. The Georgian Dream's propaganda, obviously, never mentioned that a relatively small Hungary, with only 2.5 percent of the EU's population, only 12 MEPs out of 705 and only 1% of the EU's GDP, heavily depends on the EU's agricultural subsidies and structural funds and is not such a superpower that can singlehandedly decide Georgia's European integration bid. But propaganda does not like facts; it only uses pragmatically lucrative narratives to mislead the domestic population.

Most of the Georgian electorate, which favors Europe, is generally not well-versed in foreign policy specifics or the complex details of Hungarian governance. Similarly, they are not well-informed about Hungary's interactions with the European Union or other European capitals. Therefore, the ruling party's media easily cast Viktor Orbán as Georgia's staunch ally. Prime Minister Gharibashvili has [lauded](#) the Hungarian prime minister as an "exemplary leader," "the example to imitate," and a "true friend." In his famous toast to Mr Orbán, the Georgian Prime Minister thanked his host for his fight "for preserving history, culture, identity, loyalty to our

nations, homeland, faith, the sanctity of family and respect for our traditions.”

The Georgian Dream, therefore, found an incredibly useful European leader who, while being an EU and NATO member, still shares ideological views with the Georgian Dream party, levels accusations of partiality and unfairness at the EU, seeks accommodation with Putin, opposes Western punitive measures against Russia, advocates for a neutral stance in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and labels the United States and the EU as warmongers. Furthermore, when such an EU member disregards the core democratic principle of the separation of powers, suppresses dissenting media, undermines the autonomy of academia, marginalizes minority groups, including the LGBT+ community, manipulates the electorate, and ensures that the economic benefits are skewed in favor of business interests close to those in power, such a leader fits like a glove for the Georgian Dream’s propaganda efforts.

These constant public invocations of the Budapest-Tbilisi axis and Viktor Orbán as the model European leader are crucial to the Georgian Dream’s strategy in its battle for Georgian public opinion. Starting from the principle that the latter is both pro-European and conservative (attached to Christianity, to “traditional values,” to a mythologized historical narrative, to particular conceptions of gender, etc.), Georgian Dream strategists have made the

figure of Viktor Orbán their propagandistic centerpiece. They can claim: “We are not anti-European; we want a Europe like Hungary” or “We are not against Ukraine, and for Russia, we act like Hungary, an EU and NATO member state.”

Georgia is progressing towards European integration, yet on a path marked by dignity, sovereignty, and national identity – a path exemplified by Viktor Orbán.

The Georgian Dream party places a high priority on convincing pro-European voters that their stance is not aligned with Russia but with Europe, contending they are merely challenging a version of liberalism and a European identity that they perceive as being undermined by LGBT+ minorities - main culprits in eroding family and traditional values. The party’s ultimate goal is to hold onto power, making a refusal to engage with the EU on their terms. Therefore, the Georgian Dream propagates the perception that Georgia is progressing towards European integration, yet on a path marked by dignity, sovereignty, and national identity – a path exemplified by Viktor Orbán.

However, Viktor Orbán’s rapport with Vladimir Putin, particularly the fact that he remains in contact with Mr Putin despite international ostracism, is downplayed. The pro-government Georgian media did not report on Hungarian For-

eign Minister Peter Szijjártó's immediate travel to Moscow following his visit to Tbilisi. Neither did the media report that Viktor Orbán's visit to Georgia continued in China, where he met Vladimir Putin in person – a rare encounter of a European leader with a Russian dictator since the invasion of Ukraine.

More “Orbánization” Ahead

Now that the candidate status has been given to Georgia, the nation is gearing up for the pivotal elections in October 2024. However, this new status is unlikely to alter the government's current course, which includes continued, if not intensified, pressure on political opponents, civil society, and the independent media. Objectively, the candidate status is crucial for affirming the EU's long-term commitment to aligning Georgia and as a potential tool for peeling it away from Russian influence. But there is a risk that in the near term, having received EU candidacy may embolden the government to suppress pro-European elements within the country further.

This risk could only be mitigated if the EU takes a principled stance on its values, is firm against any repressive measures by the Georgian government, and imposes more stringent conditions for EU integration. Responding as early as possible to signs of foul play from the Georgian Dream is important. Many bad ideas,

dropped because of the EU and domestic pressure, could resurface. For instance, there have been talks among Georgian Dream-aligned lawmakers about resurrecting the controversial “foreign agents” legislation that sparked extensive protests in March 2023 – this time under the guise of aligning with the EU Directive on Transparency of Interest Representation on behalf of Third Countries.

The campaign for the 2024 Parliamentary elections is set to focus heavily on themes resonant with Viktor Orbán's politics: matters of European integration, national identity, family values, and Christian traditions. Shortly after the EU's decision, the government declared plans for extensive educational reforms, with the Prime Minister vocalizing the need to counter liberal influences purportedly seeking to alter the “DNA of the Georgian population.”

Among other challenges that the pro-European forces in Georgia face, an additional one is now evident – denounce the Budapest-Tbilisi axis and reveal to the broadest public the true nature of Hungarian internal politics and Viktor Orbán's undeniable links with Vladimir Putin. ■

Georgia's Alternative Diplomacy and Its Participants

Central governments typically assert monopolies on violence and foreign and monetary policies. Historically, the most contested monopoly has been in the domain of violence, whether through riots, uprisings, or revolutions. Victors, having established their dominance, would enforce their own monetary policies without challenge. Foreign policy has consistently been regarded as the prerogative of rulers and their entourages, even when entourage members diverged from the ruler's priorities. Any attempt by the masses to break these monopolies would result in cataclysmic consequences for the country or state.

The prominent role of foreign policy in Georgian politics is evident.

The prominent role of foreign policy in Georgian politics is evident. Presently, major political clashes revolve around foreign policy orientation, or the perception thereof, encompassing economics, security, development, jobs, education, and various other aspects of domestic policies. Even the theme of Georgian identity is overshadowed by foreign policy, with opponents of the European development vector asserting that the West is “stripping us of Georgianness,” whatever that term implies. Recent massive rallies were centered around issues directly related to foreign policy, such as European integration, support for Ukraine, the visit of the vice-speaker of the Russian Duma, and the so-called foreign agents' law.



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In Georgia's' recent history, a “tradition” has emerged where external forces moderate irreconcilable domestic differences. Examples include the Rose Revolution of 2003 and the James Baker-brokered transition, the 2004 confrontation between the central government and Adjara leader Aslan Abashidze resolved by Igor Ivanov, the 2007 clashes of Saakashvili with the opposition and subsequent elections brokered by Joseph Biden, and the most

recent political crisis of 2021 when the opposition first refused to join the Parliament due to rampant fabrication of the parliamentary elections but then followed the deal brokered by the European Council President Charles Michel.

The extensive foreign policy agenda in Georgian politics is not surprising. Not only does the current international order enable a country like Georgia to exist

as a nation-state, but regional or global politics significantly influence security, the economy, and welfare. The Georgian economy relies heavily on export markets, transit fees and services, foreign direct investments, and remittances sent by relatives working abroad. Its cultural relevance necessitates a “breathing ground,” which can only be provided by active collaboration with cultural entities abroad. Many Georgian talents, whether opera singers, artists, or sportsmen, find successful international careers beyond Georgia. Notable figures in Georgia’s recent history obtained education abroad, making the importation of knowledge an aspiration. Thousands of Georgian students seek opportunities in European and American universities. All these opportunities demand an active foreign policy to ensure freedom of movement, special trade regimes, transportation logistics, and favorable attitudes.

Foreign policy, like any other policy, requires vision and resources, including human resources. Since the early days of independence in 1918, Georgian leaders have not had issues with vision. The leadership of the first independent Republic considered itself part of the global socialist international. Subsequent Communist leaders saw Georgia as a springboard for larger ambitions and agendas, trying to match visions of the “greater Georgian” - Joseph Stalin or consequent Communist leaders. After the collapse of

the Soviet Union, the first president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, dreamed of the Caucasian House, a self-sufficient political entity where Georgia would play a pivotal mobilizing and coordinating role. Returned from the Kremlin, former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze promoted Georgia’s role as a transit country, benefiting all neighbors through reliable transit and trading routes. Mikheil Saakashvili propelled Georgia’s image as a country that defied conventional wisdom about corruption, the speed of transformation, democratization, and modernization. All three leaders had an active foreign policy with significant resources allocated. Saakashvili was so engaged with international affairs that Georgians used to joke: “If one plane takes off and one lands at Tbilisi airport, both of them will have Saakashvili onboard.”

Under Bidzina Ivanishvili, the foreign policy vision became elusive, blurred, and constantly adjusted to one person’s needs, phobias, and business interests.

Under Bidzina Ivanishvili, the foreign policy vision became elusive, blurred, and constantly adjusted to one person’s needs, phobias, and business interests. Consequently, the official foreign policy establishment mimics allusiveness, blur, and a lack of initiative. Even the President, with a representational function granted by the Constitution, is restricted from traveling

outside of Georgia and representing the country to foreign policy communities.

Regarding human resources, current or former Georgian diplomats traditionally played a distinctive role in Georgian politics. The most recent 2018 presidential elections featured two candidates, both former foreign ministers of Georgia. The core leadership of the Free Democrats party, formerly part of the Georgian Dream coalition led by the former Ambassador to the UN, Irakli Alasania, was made up of former diplomats. The diplomatic corps of Georgia nurtured ministers, deputy ministers, and high-ranking officials operating in various fields of Georgian politics.

After the Georgian Dream coalition assumed power, disenchanted by Saakashvili's policies, former diplomats found themselves as allegedly "valuable members of the coalition." Currently, most of them, along with a significant number of Saakashvili's senior diplomats who are unwanted by the current regime, are scattered among Georgian political opposition, domestic or Western academic institutions, or private businesses. Politically motivated persecutions directly affected members of the Georgian diplomatic community. The notable case was the groundless persecution of the David Garedji Monastery negotiation team and its members, which deeply scarred the foreign policy establishment. The remain-

ing cohort of trained and experienced diplomats diligently continues to serve their country in a silent mode.

It is painful to observe how Georgia's once prestigious foreign policy community visibly shrunk and became insignificant.

It is painful to observe how Georgia's once prestigious foreign policy community visibly shrunk and became insignificant. The most potent pro-Western political allies of the Georgian Dream were ostracized over time. Serious cracks started to appear in the belief that the Georgian Dream seriously intended to lead Georgia to EU and NATO membership. The war in Ukraine exposed that these intentions were not real. On the contrary, more facts suggested a fundamental shift in Georgia's foreign policy orientation and self-abdication of a once proactive pro-Western diplomacy.

Georgia's Alternative Diplomacy

A new phenomenon of Georgian alternative diplomacy is forging and gaining shape.

Against this backdrop, a new phenomenon of Georgian alternative diplomacy is forging and gaining shape. Executors of the popular demand for integration of Georgia into the Western family of countries started to go beyond traditional diploma-

cy and foreign policy establishments.

Who are the actors of alternative foreign policy? First and foremost, the most visible part of it is the opposition political spectrum. Conventionally, that is what the parliamentary/systemic opposition should do. However, in Georgia's case, new opposition forces emerge almost every quarter due to in-party splits and re-organizations, all seeking foreign support. Delegations of various political opposition groups frequently visit Washington, DC, Brussels, London, Berlin or Paris. Their messages might not be congenial or coordinated, often blaming the government and each other. Nonetheless, their visits undoubtedly affect the comprehension of Georgian politics by observers in these capitals.

Opposition parties actively collaborate and associate themselves with ideologically organized pan-European political party families such as the EPP (European People's Party) and the ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe). Therefore, the European Parliament becomes one of the venues where Georgian issues are discussed, and resolutions are adopted with the active involvement and influence of Georgian opposition parties. A similar process can be observed in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, where the Georgian opposition is also a frequent visitor.

The second group of actors in alternative diplomacy surely are the civil society organizations of all kinds, from advocacy groups and watchdogs to think tanks.

The second group of actors in alternative diplomacy surely are the civil society organizations of all kinds, from advocacy groups and watchdogs to think tanks. Their access and partnerships with colleagues and like-minded institutions abroad enable them to loudly voice their opinions outside Georgia. By default, they become a reference point for any journalists, domestic or international, assessing political developments in Georgia. Various coalitions and platforms provide a powerful platform for Georgian NGOs to coordinate and promote their vision among European and Western establishments. These coalitions often organize protests, take steps, and issue joint statements regarding vital issues for the country, including foreign policy ones, such as integration into the EU.

It is very noticeable that think tank-organized events bring more of Georgia's external friends to the country than government-initiated endeavors. Unfortunately, the government's representation at such events is either negligible or a complete boycott, further disenfranchising it from an active foreign policy practice. So-called "government-organized non-governmental organizations" (GONGOs) have very lit-

the effect on foreign policy, if any.

Media outlets critical of the government also discovered their power to affect the country's foreign policy. It is not only domestic reporting on international events and how Georgia is scoring (or mostly not scoring) on such events. Accredited Georgian journalists can pose critical questions to the leadership of the EU or NATO, the White House, or the Department of State. Such questions require a qualified response and serve as an incentive to address issues in the questioned areas.

The next group is the business community. While globalization envisions the active participation of major multinational companies in the fates of small countries, as of today, no major multinationals operating in Georgia can be a determining factor for foreign policy. However, there is a tendency of harassed local businesses forming, or supporting a political entity to defend their interests from unfair treatment. All those "industrialist" parties seek a sympathetic ear abroad by spending significant resources to affect the policies of Western countries toward Georgia. The most vivid example is the Lelo political party and the founders of the TBC business group who stand behind it. Harassment of foreign entities has almost the same effect, save the formation of a political party. The Frontera Group, which claimed unjustified persecution from the current Georgian government, relied on lobbying ser-

vices in the US whose purpose was exactly that - affecting foreign policy.

Chambers of Commerce, comprising businesses from various countries, are increasingly critical of Georgian governments and their treatment of the business environment for Western companies. They serve as "canaries in the coal mine," indicating shifts in domestic and foreign policies and inadvertently affecting external attitudes toward Georgia.

In some cases, businesses basically substitute an official foreign policy channel. Georgia's relations with the Central Asian countries are largely dominated by private companies that either advise the region's governments on various reform agendas or organize transportation and logistics on the East-West trade route through Georgia's territory and its ports.

Traditionally, diaspora organizations are considered powerful instruments in one's foreign policy. Today, the Georgian diaspora is not as organized, capable, or powerful to play in the same league as the Armenian diaspora worldwide. However, foreign policy actors may emerge from very unexpected places, too. Almost 2,000 Georgians, currently fighting alongside Ukrainians, can be considered foreign policy players who, unlike the officials in Tbilisi, ensure continuous friendship between Ukrainian and Georgian nations.

Ronald Reagan used to joke: “Today, if someone offered us the world on a silver platter, most of us would take the platter.” Historically, the silver platter in the hands of rulers was carrying Georgia itself to various contenders. Today, pro-Western political and intellectual elite consider integration into Western institutions a silver bullet rather than a platter for security challenges and economic development. As for the platter, the non-governmental players of alternative diplomacy accuse the government of melting the platter into the 30 silver coins.

An ideal solution for the stable, sustainable, and successful development of Georgia and its foreign policy would be to merge these parallel lines of diplomacy into one bold line.

One can argue whether the activity of alternative diplomacy makes any practical sense or has any meaningful consequences. Foreign policy, in general, is a combination of a multitude of small vectors, directing and supporting the main vector. However, a significant number of small vectors can profoundly affect the direction of the main vector. Evidence of the effectiveness of today’s alternative diplomacy is manifested not only in yet intangible and hardly quantifiable attitudes of the Western countries toward the Georgian leadership of the foreign policy establishment but also in very concrete decisions

like granting Georgia (though with conditions) EU membership candidate status. Accompanied justification that the status is deserved by the people of Georgia rather than its current government serves as yet another proof of the success of parallel diplomacy.

By definition, parallel lines are lines that never intersect. Nevertheless, they can overlap. An ideal solution for the stable, sustainable, and successful development of Georgia and its foreign policy would be to merge these parallel lines of diplomacy into one bold line. ■

The New Security Environment in NATO's Eastern Flank

Differences of Perception

There has always been a [noticeable difference](#) in threat perceptions and security approaches towards the northern and southern parts of the eastern front-line between NATO and Russia. While the wider Baltic Sea region is firmly anchored into NATO, the southern flank is increasingly vulnerable. The [strategic concept](#) embraced by NATO in 2022 recognizes the interconnectedness of security for aspirant countries with the alliance's own security. Moreover, the new posture underscores that the strength of any alliance equals the strength of its weakest link, aiming to address imbalances between the north-eastern and south-eastern flanks

by adopting a [forward defense](#) stance.

The north-east, which includes Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Finland, and Sweden (also referred to as the Baltic-Nordic region or wider Baltic Sea region), comprises countries that are members of the EU or both NATO and the EU. This facilitates easier regional cooperation and closer focus in Brussels.

The south-east (or the wider Black Sea region), consisting of Bulgaria, Romania, Türkiye, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, exhibits more diversity in terms of membership, with Romania and Bulgaria belonging to both the EU and NATO, Türkiye being a NATO member and Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine still awaiting mem-



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ESTONIA

LATVIA

POLAND

BELARUS

UKRAINE

MOLDOVA

ROMANIA

BLACK SEA

BULGARIA

GEORGIA

TURKEY

bership in either organization. These differences in membership contribute to diverse intra-regional perspectives and difficulties in shaping sub-regional policies in Brussels.

The countries in the south, in contrast to those in the north, navigate varied levels of relationships and security guarantees from NATO and the EU, guiding them to seek unique or collective regional approaches to common challenges.

The countries in the south, in contrast to those in the north, navigate varied levels of relationships and security guarantees from NATO and the EU, guiding them to seek unique or collective regional approaches to common challenges. These varied degrees of engagement restrict the potential for regional defense and security collaboration on the one hand and, on the other, complicate the consensus-building process for regional security strategies within Brussels.

Evolution of the NATO Approach

Regardless of the differences from north to south, both segments of the frontline share a commonality in the *modus operandi* of the EU and NATO based on the principle of avoiding escalation and provocation with Russia at all costs.

For years, the EU and NATO lacked a clear, proactive strategy for the Eastern frontline, only reacting to Russia's aggression. Yielding initiative and constant endeavors to avoid provoking Russia had the opposite effect, weakening the West's deterrence capabilities and emboldening Russia's reckless hybrid strategy.

While the Baltic and Nordic countries maintained a high threat perception, the annexation of Crimea revealed that space for Russia in the north was much more restricted, whereas the Black Sea region remained vulnerable and exposed.

The analysis of the so-called Gerasimov doctrine or Russia's [coherent strategy](#) of regaining control over the post-Soviet space and preventing NATO enlargement shows that with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Kremlin aimed at grabbing low-hanging fruit in the south with the hope of a return to its [agenda](#) in the north at the next stage. The North appeared well positioned to capitalize on Russia's strategic failure in Ukraine by strengthening regional security through NATO's enlargement and enhanced defense posture. However, the security situation in the Black Sea continues to deteriorate, endangering Euro-Atlantic security due to Russia's control of the military status quo and vital trade routes.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO shifted its focus back to

collective defense and protecting the territories of its member states. NATO's posture still aims to avoid provoking Russia, maintaining a cautious approach towards opening clear membership perspectives for Ukraine and focusing its narratives on NATO not being part of the conflict as well as the defensive nature of the alliance.

NATO's actual depiction of the eastern flank only includes member states, notably excluding Türkiye, as a significant eastern ally, as well as strategic partners and aspirants like Georgia and Ukraine (see Figure 1 below). The reinforced posture involves doubling the existing multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland by adding four new battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. Multinational bat-

tlegroups provided by framework nations and contributing allies are permanently integrated into the armed forces of the host countries to defend every inch of NATO's territory. Troops from contributing nations rotate within battlegroups, allowing deployment or rapid response from their home countries as required.

However, NATO requires a decisive and comprehensive strategy to effectively address and rectify pressing security challenges and vulnerabilities across the entire eastern frontline, encompassing allied and partner territories. A successful model tested in the Baltic Sea basin could be useful in the Black Sea region, but that would require a significant bolstering of strategic planning and operational capabilities.



Figure 1: NATO's [Forward Defense](#) Posture in the Eastern Flank

Situation in the North-East

The perception of conventional security threats in the Nordic-Baltic region has remained consistently high over the past few decades. The unintended consequence of the war in Ukraine for Russia is the quick accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, a development that has reshaped the geopolitical landscape. Although consensus has been achieved regarding Finland's accession, Sweden's membership remains pending. The enlargement of NATO in the Nordic-Baltic theatre is poised to bring significant shifts in the power balance between NATO and Russia. Both Finland and Sweden boast substantial military capabilities that will bolster the Alliance. With the Nordic countries possessing the largest F35 fleet outside the US, this enlargement will enhance NATO's overall strength and provide robust military resources for addressing regional contingencies.

Despite their own security concerns, Nordic and Baltic countries have been punching above their weight to support Ukraine.

Despite their own security concerns, Nordic and Baltic countries have been punching above their weight to support Ukraine. At the same time, there is an urgent need to develop national and regional defense capabilities further. Estonia announced plans to spend 3% of its GDP on defense and security. Other countries of the re-

gion aim for similar increases, while many allies are still struggling with turning a 2% ceiling into a baseline. However, NATO's stronger position and stance in the wider Baltic region defines the defense and security policies of the regional players.

At the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO initiated its Readiness Action Plan and Adaptation to Security, establishing eight NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs) in various Eastern European countries. The first six NFIUs became fully operational by the summer of 2016, with the last two achieving full operational status in 2017. A summit was held in Warsaw in 2016 in response to Russian violations of the Minsk Protocol in 2015. There, the Alliance decided to establish NATO's forward presence (Enhanced Forward Presence – eFP) and deploy multinational battalion-size battle groups to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland by 2017.

After reassessing Russia's threat in 2022, NATO held a [Summit in Madrid](#). During this summit, the Alliance agreed to enforce all eFPs and expand the NATO Force Model to include more troops at high readiness, and Estonia committed to establishing a land forces division in December 2022. In 2023, a new generation of regional defense plans was approved at the Vilnius Summit. Additionally, the Alliance focused on improving the readiness, preparedness, and interoperability of NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defense

on the eastern flank. Upon the completion of NATO enlargement in the north, Russia will experience a notable reduction in its capacity to block allied reinforcements to the Baltic states via the Suwalki gap. Moreover, Kaliningrad, once a strategic military asset, will transition into an increasingly indefensible position, exposing a critical vulnerability for Russia.

Situation in the South-East

Black Sea security first gained NATO's attention at the Warsaw Summit in 2016 when the Alliance declared its intention to actively enhance security in the Black Sea for the first time. The Summit Declaration also emphasized the role of partner countries, including Ukraine and Georgia, and the importance of engaging them in a strategic dialogue on Black Sea security. Furthermore, during a meeting of NATO Defense Ministers in October 2016, six member states - Canada, the US, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands and Türkiye - expressed their readiness to contribute to strengthening NATO's presence in the Black Sea region, not only at sea but also on land and in the air. In practical terms, allied measures were limited to air policing missions, joint exercises, and an assistance package for Georgia and Ukraine.

At the Brussels NATO Summit in 2018, allies decided to extend NATO's forward presence along the Alliance's eastern flank from the Baltic Sea in the north to the

Black Sea in the south. While additional ships, planes, and troops were deployed in the north, including soldiers added to NATO's battlegroups and fighter jets for air policing missions, the measures in the south mainly involved heightened troop readiness. In addition, the highest-readiness element of the NATO Response Force was inaugurally deployed to Romania. However, in contrast to developing defense and warfighting capabilities under the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the north, NATO's tailored Forward Presence (tFP) in the south only aimed at enhancing situational awareness, interoperability, and responsiveness. This is a clear example of the negative consequences of diverging security viewpoints among regional countries as well as in the EU and NATO.

Unlike previous similar documents, the NATO strategic concept adopted at the 2022 Madrid Summit acknowledged that the Black Sea region is strategically important for the Alliance. Consequently, the allies agreed to establish four more multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. In Madrid, the allies also recognized the geo-economic importance of the Black Sea region and Ukraine's grain exports for global food security, accusing Russia of intentionally exacerbating a food crisis affecting billions of people worldwide. Later, in July 2023, at the NATO-Ukraine Council meeting, Secretary General Jens Stolten-

berg stated that Russia bears full responsibility for its dangerous and escalatory actions in the Black Sea region and must stop weaponizing hunger and threatening the world's most vulnerable people with food instability. Russia continues to pose substantial risks to the stability and freedom of navigation in the Black Sea region, and a solution to the problem is nowhere in sight.

Defining Factors for Black Sea Security

The current status quo across the eastern flank is largely dictated by the stance and approaches of the two vitally important stakeholders – the US and Türkiye.

The current status quo across the eastern flank is largely dictated by the stance and approaches of the two vitally important stakeholders – the US and Türkiye. The US has a [visible presence](#) and active engagement across the northern part of the eastern flank, with its troops and equipment prepositioned in Poland and vibrant military [cooperation with Nordic countries](#). In stark contrast, a recently initiated bipartisan [Black Sea Security Act](#) only provides a set of useful ideas; however, it is obvious that the US will rely on reassurance measures more than deterrence or defense in the short to medium term. At this stage, US engagement in the southeast is limited to sporadic activities in Romania and dif-

ficult relationships with Türkiye.

Türkiye has become a factor in the north as it started to veto Sweden's and Finland's accession. According to many [experts](#), the Turkish veto is related to the differences with the US and a failure to agree on military acquisitions that are vitally important for the country's defense needs. Notably, Türkiye has a key to any major efforts aimed at upholding security, safety, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Black Sea region through the 1936 [Montreux Convention](#), restricting the ability of non-Black Sea countries to maintain credible forces in the region by limiting tonnage and rotation time of their vessels.

After Sweden formally joins NATO, Russia will likely reconsider its approach towards the Baltic region and limit its appetite for the sphere of exclusive influences in the north. Accordingly, Russia will probably increase its efforts and concentrate its resources on the Black Sea region. Relocation of all its warfighting capabilities from the Western military districts toward Ukraine can be considered the first sign of such acknowledgment by Russia. Another symptom of Russia's clear focus on achieving supremacy in the Black Sea region is its accelerated efforts to extend its influence in Georgia. In parallel with massive hybrid warfare activities, Russia also reinforces its military presence by partially relocating its Black Sea fleet to a military base in the occupied region

of Abkhazia. Manipulation by extending zones of destabilization and the escalation of conflicts are Russia's tools of last resort in its pursuit of spheres of its exclusive influence.

Consequences for the Black Sea Region

NATO seems to be laser-focused on collective defense, preparing for high-intensity and multi-domain operations and ensuring reinforcement of any ally on short notice from north to south. While this might be good news for the Nordic-Baltic region, soon to be fully covered by Article 5 security guarantees, such an approach is hardly enough to ensure security and stability in the Black Sea region.

Full-fledged military cooperation and enlargement process in the Black Sea region is still hostage to the fear of escalation with Russia, preventing adequate measures desperately needed to ensure regional security and stability. Finland's and Sweden's decisions for quick membership are practical proof that only NATO membership can deter Russian aggression in the new security environment.

The absence of a cohesive Western vision regarding the ultimate resolution of the conflict in Ukraine provides Russia with a sense of optimism.

The effectiveness and the resolve of the Western response to the war in Ukraine will largely define security dynamics in the whole Euro-Atlantic area, and particularly in the Black Sea region. The absence of a cohesive Western vision regarding the ultimate resolution of the conflict in Ukraine provides Russia with a sense of optimism. Russia anticipates that sustaining the conflict will result in Western fatigue, leading to dwindling support for Ukraine, a relaxation of sanctions, and, ultimately, a degradation of Ukraine's capacity to resist.

If Russia manages to maintain occupation of some parts of Ukraine, it will be able to maintain its primacy in the whole Black Sea region. In this scenario the entire Black Sea region could become hostage to Russia's destabilizing tactics. Consequently, Moldova and Georgia would continue to grapple with the destabilizing consequences of Russian control over occupied territories, hindering both their internal progress and external prospects.

Way Ahead

Any successful Western strategy in the Black Sea must include security assurances to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

Any successful Western strategy in the Black Sea must include security assurances to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

There is a successful model of including partners in regional security considerations in the Baltic region. The leadership of the US in the process is indispensable both for forging unified regional security views among regional countries and for stimulating bold decisions in Brussels. The Black Sea Security Act could serve as a good starting point; however, actions on the ground aimed at pinpointing the strong US presence in the region through prepositioning the troops and equipment and increased visibility measures are still needed and long overdue. Strong military cooperation taking into account the real defense needs of the countries in the region under similar terms as in the Nordic-Baltic region will be vital.

A crucial element in deterring Russia from exacerbating the instability in the Black Sea region is the establishment of a clear roadmap for Ukraine and Georgia's accession to NATO. It is imperative that NATO take substantive steps to translate the political decision made in Bucharest sixteen years ago into actionable measures. To achieve this, NATO must ensure that unresolved conflicts no longer serve as a reason for [vetoing](#) the enlargement process. This can be accomplished by extending security guarantees to the unoccupied territories of both Ukraine and Georgia. Such a proactive approach would send a resounding signal to Russia, signifying NATO's unwavering commitment to Black Sea security on par with other areas with-

in the alliance, effectively discouraging Russia from engaging in further military aggression in its neighborhood.

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