

# GEO POLITICS

№14 | JANUARY 2025

**BACK  
TO THE  
FUTURE**

**BIDZINA IVANISHVILI  
GEORGIAN DREAM**

Getting back to the Russian future  
is only the beginning.



**FROM NOVEMBER 28**



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# **GEO POLITICS**

**Issue №14**  
January, 2025

# Our Mission

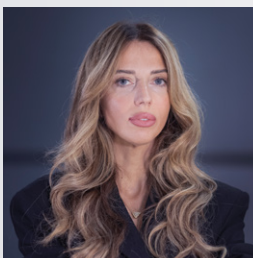
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual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

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

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



**Ana Khurtsidze**

President of Gnomon Wise  
and Dean of Law School  
of the University of Georgia



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Executive Director of  
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# Contributors



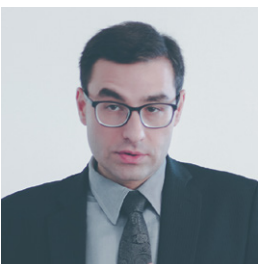
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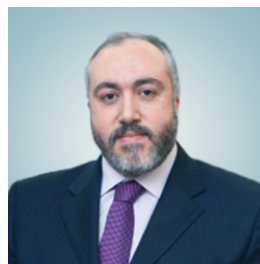
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### **Natalie Sabanadze** Contributor

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



### **Jaba Devdariani** Contributor

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

# Guest contributor



### **Tamara Kovziridze** Guest Contributor

Tamara Kovziridze has extensive experience in governance, consulting and academic activities. In 2004-2012 she held various senior positions in the Government of Georgia, among others as Deputy Minister of Economy and as Chief Adviser to the Prime Minister. Tamara participated in planning and implementation of key regulatory and trade reforms and led preparation and negotiation process on the EU-Georgia DCFTA. As partner and senior director at a consulting firm Reformatics, since 2012 Tamara has advised more than a dozen governments in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East on regulatory, institutional and economic reforms. Tamara Kovziridze holds a Master's degree in political science and economics from the University of Heidelberg, Germany and a Ph.D. from the Free University of Brussels, Belgium.

# Georgians Adamantly Opposed to Being Snatched “Back to the Russian Future” by the Oligarchic Regime

**T**he protests of Georgians against the anti-European and pro-Russian Georgian Dream ruling party have entered the symbolic 41<sup>st</sup> day, marking one of the longest non-stop protests against any regime by angry Georgian citizens. The zeal, energy, and dedication of the self-organized groups, civil society organizations, and political opposition, together with President Salome Zourabichvili, leaves an impression that the *status quo ante* and “business as usual” with the Georgian Dream will not be possible. This stand-off marks the deepest political crisis Georgia has faced in decades. As frequently happens, the economic and financial repercussions of this crisis are yet to hit, and we will make sure to capture these developments in 2025 on the pages of *GEOpolitics*.

The West’s stern condemnation of the Georgian Dream’s brutal crackdown on the peaceful demonstrators, imposition of unprecedented, albeit uncoordinated and still weak sanctions on the Georgian Dream leaders, and American financial sanctions against Bidzina Ivanishvili put Georgia in front of a damaging international isolation. Georgia’s foreign and security policy is shattering as a result, with the regime’s goals transforming from fulfilling national security interests into legitimacy-fishing.

Embroiled in internal electoral and power transition problems, as well as the challenge of dealing with the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine,

the EU and the USA still manage to find time and attention to Georgian issues. This raises hopes among the peaceful protesters that the European and Western aspirations of the brave Georgians will be matched by just as brave steps from the Western capitals. This issue is, therefore, dedicated to the ongoing protests and the precarious crisis in which Georgia finds itself at the outset of the year.

Sergi Kapanadze opens the journal with an overview of the ongoing protests and an analysis of the demonstrators’ demands for new elections, the release of political prisoners, and the Western response to the political crisis. The repressions against the dissenters, mistreatment, and torture, as well as new draconic laws, have been added to the anti-European and non-democratic record of the Georgian Dream. The international response to Ivanishvili’s new level of authoritarianism has been swift but fragmented, with limited EU actions and stronger but isolated U.S. and bilateral EU member states’ sanctions. The stakes of the Eurovolution extend beyond Georgia, as its authoritarian drift risks bolstering Moscow’s influence and weakening the West’s interests in the wider region. The article calls for the necessity of the strategy from the Western partners of Georgia, including specific steps how to de-legitimize the Georgian Dream regime, expand sanctions, and support civil society and opposition groups to avert a democratic collapse in Georgia.

Jaba Devdariani continues the analysis of Georgia's escalating political crisis through the prism of the clash between an increasingly authoritarian regime and a rising middle class demanding greater representation and rights. Despite years-long economic growth fueled by Western reforms and Russian capital inflows, the Georgian Dream regime has alienated the middle class through its authoritarian practices, anti-Western rhetoric, and alignment with Russia. Protests ignited by fraudulent elections and, on the record, reversal of the EU path have been met with state violence. Still, civil society, expatriates, and nascent labor movements support public resilience. The struggle is reminiscent of the bourgeois revolutions of 1848, where economic contributors demanded political power but lacked broad alliances. The article warns that while public sympathy for the middle class is growing, their success hinges on uniting disparate social groups and securing decisive international support before the Georgian Dream consolidates its control or aligns further with regional autocracies.

Natalie Sabanadze then steps in with insight into Georgia's sudden departure from the EU path in November 2024, examining whether this U-turn represents Russian influence or a domestically-driven transformation. She argues that while Moscow benefits from the Georgian Dream's anti-Western pivot, this alignment stems as much from Bidzina Ivanishvili's agenda as from Kremlin strategy. Sabanadze highlights GD's ideological shift to far-right nationalism, adoption of Russian-style laws, and deepened economic ties with Moscow as markers of Georgia's drift into Russia's orbit. External enablers like Hungary amplify this trend, providing the GD cover to dismantle democracy while maintaining a façade of European alignment. The article critiques Western hesitancy in countering these developments, warning that Georgia risks losing its strategic value as a democratic model in the South Caucasus, leaving

it vulnerable to regional autocracies and deepening Russia's foothold.

Shota Gvineria picks up the criticism of the West's strategic ambiguity, arguing that indecisiveness has emboldened authoritarian regimes and left countries like Georgia and Ukraine vulnerable to Russian aggression and malicious influence. The article highlights how delayed and fragmented Western responses, compounded by internal divisions within NATO and the EU, have undermined efforts to confront Russia effectively. While Ukraine's resistance exposed Moscow's vulnerabilities, the West's lack of clear objectives and inconsistent sanctions allowed Russia to exploit its hybrid warfare tactics in Georgia, further destabilizing the region. Georgia's democratic backsliding under the Georgian Dream regime is both a regional and global challenge, with profound implications for Euro-Atlantic security. He calls for urgent, unified action—targeted sanctions, robust support for democratic forces, and decisive policies—to counter Russian influence and prevent further erosion of democratic values in the Black Sea region.

Temuri Yakobashvili examines the dynamics of modern proxy warfare, linking historical examples to contemporary conflicts and Georgia's precarious geopolitical situation. The article highlights how external powers like Russia and Iran utilize proxy regimes and actors to advance their strategic interests while destabilizing adversaries. The article argues that Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream government has become a de facto proxy of Russia, aligning its policies and rhetoric with Moscow's goals. This alignment undermines Georgia's democratic aspirations and European integration. He calls for urgent Western recognition of Georgia's regime as a Russian proxy, combined with targeted sanctions, robust support for pro-democracy forces, and high-level engagement with opposition and civil society. By addressing the

proxy nature of Georgia's government, the West can diminish Russian influence and reinforce stability in the region, ensuring long-term peace and progress under democratic principles.

Vano Chkhikvadze steps in with a criticism of the EU's cautious response to Georgia's democratic backsliding under the Georgian Dream government. Following the GD's withdrawal from the EU accession process and passage of authoritarian laws, the EU suspended visa-free travel for Georgian diplomatic passport holders but preserved it for ordinary citizens to avoid punishing the public for their government's actions. While this move signaled solidarity with pro-European Georgians, Chkhikvadze warns that the lack of enforcement mechanisms risks rendering the decision symbolic. He advocates for more targeted measures, such as banning individual officials responsible for democratic regression from the EU and Schengen Zone, to ensure accountability and uphold the EU's credibility as a global actor committed to democracy and the rule of law.

Tamara Kovziridze continues with the analysis of EU-Georgia relations, with a take on stagnating EU-Georgia trade under the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) amidst deteriorating political relations. Despite the DCFTA's promise, Georgia's exports to the EU have grown minimally, reflecting a broader decline in economic interdependence as the Georgian Dream government shifts toward closer ties with Russia. While the DCFTA catalyzed legal reforms and facilitated new free trade agreements, its potential remains underutilized due to a lack of government strategy and declining trust in Georgia's pro-European commitment. The Georgian Dream's suspension of

EU accession efforts and adoption of anti-democratic policies further erode trade relations, leaving the EU hesitant to engage. The author warns that without a clear policy shift toward European integration, Georgia risks deepening its alignment with Russia and losing the long-term benefits of its trade frameworks with the EU.

Thornike Gordadze concludes the issue with an analysis of the historical, cultural, and political reasons behind the Georgian military's political neutrality, even amidst the country's current political crisis. Tracing the legacy of Soviet influence, militia politics of the 1990s, and subsequent reforms under post-independence governments, Gordadze highlights how the armed forces evolved into a professional institution largely detached from political intervention. Under the Georgian Dream government, however, the military has been sidelined, treated more as a social support system than a defense force, and subjected to extensive political control. Despite this, the military retains significant public trust and a pro-Western orientation among many personnel. The article argues that while the regime avoids deploying the army directly, fearing backlash or defections, its cautious legitimacy crisis and increased reliance on Ministry of Interior forces underscore the delicate balance in managing dissent. Gordadze warns that deepening unrest could push the regime to escalate repression, including potential military involvement, though such a move risks destabilizing its already fragile hold on power ■

With Respect,  
**Editorial Team**



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# The West Needs a Strategy to Support the Georgian “Euolution”

**G**eorgia teeters on the edge of authoritarianism. What was once a beacon of democracy in the South Caucasus, a country striving for European integration, has plunged into its deepest political crisis in decades. The October 2024 parliamentary elections, riddled with massive fraud and intimidation, and subsequent rejection of the European integration path have not only shattered public trust but have ignited waves of protests across the nation. These grassroots demonstrations, demanding justice and the restoration of democracy and the European integration efforts, have been met with an alarming escalation of state violence, repression, and democratic backsliding. The Georgian Dream (GD) regime, under the control of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, appears more determined than ever to consolidate its grip on power, even at the cost of Georgia’s European aspirations and complete Western isolation.

The atmosphere of the demonstrations is distinctly Georgian. Fireworks, marches, closed down Rustaveli Avenue, creative protests, New

Year’s Feast with a kilometer-long table (supra), strikes, and other peculiar forms of manifestations, while completely peaceful and dedicated, raise hopes that the Georgians do not plan to give in to self-proclaimed authoritarianism. While these protests resemble historical movements elsewhere in Europe, they will likely culminate in a uniquely Georgian outcome, which we will explore further below. What is already clear, however, is that the status quo before October 2024 can not be returned. Public trust in the Georgian Dream has been fundamentally broken, and no superficial reset to “factory settings” can restore it—not even among former Georgian Dream supporters.

***The stakes are high—not just for Georgia but also for the West. Failure to act decisively could allow Georgia to slip further into the orbit of authoritarian powers, embolden regimes worldwide, and erode the European Union’s influence in the region.***



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The stakes are high—not just for Georgia but also for the West. Failure to act decisively could allow Georgia to slip further into the orbit of authoritarian powers, embolden regimes worldwide, and erode the European Union's influence in the region. This moment calls for a robust, unified response and, more importantly, strategy from the international community.

## The Legitimacy Crisis: A Democratic Fabric Torn Apart

The October 2024 elections were a turning point in Georgia's post-Soviet history. Observers noted glaring violations that undermined the integrity of the electoral process. From breaches in ballot secrecy to overt voter intimidation, the elections [resembled](#) a farcical exercise in democracy conducted in a spirit of [special operation](#) to maintain power at all costs. Reports from international monitors and investigative journalists described how GD loyalists used cameras, fake observers, and intimidation tactics to ensure votes were cast for the ruling party. Citizens faced threats of job loss, financial penalties, and even physical harm if they failed to comply.

However, perhaps the most egregious manipulation came from data misuse on Georgian citizens residing abroad. Carousel voting and fabricated ballots inflated turnout in key precincts, creating impossible discrepancies between the number of registered voters and those allegedly casting ballots. When a court briefly annulled election results in one district, the GD-controlled judiciary swiftly overturned the decision, highlighting the regime's iron grip on the justice system.

Meanwhile, independent media faced relentless attacks. Journalists reporting on electoral fraud were harassed, detained, and, in some cases, brutally assaulted. Opposition media, already crippled by financial sanctions and criminal proceedings,

operated under conditions of constant fear and surveillance. NGOs, long at the forefront of Georgia's democratic movement, were similarly targeted. Burdened by restrictive foreign agent laws and incessant government harassment, their capacity to observe and report on the elections was severely diminished. To their credit, three independent election observation missions were assembled anyway, and most of the electoral fraud was registered by the NGO-led observation and citizen groups.

These actions by the GD have invited troubling comparisons to the authoritarian regimes of Russia and Belarus. After the election results were declared, Georgian Dream displayed characteristic authoritarian behavior, swiftly bypassing constitutional court rulings—which it effectively controls—to secure its mandate to govern for another four years. The ensuing protests were disregarded, with the regime shifting its focus to seeking international legitimacy through handshakes, meetings, and congratulatory messages from Western leaders. However, only Georgia's immediate neighbors and Hungary have extended such recognition to date. When the government attempted to [tout](#) the NATO Secretary General's formal New Year congratulatory note as a diplomatic endorsement, a NATO spokesperson swiftly downplayed its significance, attributing it to routine bureaucratic annual correspondence..

## Repression and Resistance: The Battle for Georgia's European Soul

*Protesters have coalesced around two precise demands: new, free, and fair elections under international supervision and the immediate release of all political prisoners.*

The fraudulent elections triggered the Georgian Dream's November 28 decision to reverse European integration efforts, which led to unprecedented grassroots resistance. Since then, tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of Georgians have taken to the streets for over a month, braving cold weather and the holiday season to demand change. Protesters have coalesced around two precise demands: new, free, and fair elections under international supervision and the immediate release of all political prisoners.

But the regime has responded with systematic violence. Riot police armed with water cannons, tear gas, and batons have brutally suppressed demonstrations. [Reports](#) of torture in detention, threats of rape, and the use of chemical agents against protesters paint a grim picture of state-sanctioned violence. Civil servants, including diplomats, who dared to voice dissent have been fired en masse, further narrowing the space for opposition.

In December, the Georgian Dream [passed](#) a series of legislative amendments to further "strengthen" its authoritarian credentials. These amendments aimed to curb dissent, tighten control over the civil service, and suppress public resistance to its departure from the European path. Adopted under urgent procedures and enacted from January 1, these changes targeted key areas of civic life and governance, raising concerns about their impact on democracy and human rights.

The amendments to the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations prohibited items like pyrotechnics, lasers, and face coverings at rallies, citing their use in recent protests against police violence. The Administrative Offenses Code imposed steep fines and penalties for protest-related activities, including traffic blockades, graffiti, and disobeying police orders. It also expanded the scope for arbitrary detention and intrusive police searches without court orders.

The Police Law now allows non-competitive recruitment, opening doors to politically motivated hires. The Law on Civil Service introduced measures to politicize the civil service, including reclassifying department heads as political appointees, enabling arbitrary dismissals, and linking performance evaluations to political oversight. As expected, these laws were applied swiftly; over 800 civil servants were reportedly fired in just a few days.

## Scenarios Ahead

How these protests will end is anyone's guess. However, several factors will determine the outcome of the resistance. The first such factor is resilience and fatigue. As Jaba Devdariani notes elsewhere in this issue, the core group of the protesters in Tbilisi streets comprises the middle class and youth, for whom the red line of authoritarianism has been crossed and who have decided collectively and individually that they will resist the backsliding of Georgia at all costs. However, the protest energy dwells on the multiplication and proliferation of protests and success in fulfilling demands. Since the demands will not be fulfilled swiftly, the fatigue risk is high. So far, at least, the main hope of the GD, that the Georgians would forget the protests because of the New Year holidays, turned out futile. On New Year's Eve, there was a [huge demonstration](#) on Rustaveli Avenue.

However, if the fatigue prevails and the Georgian Dream manages to enter a new political year with an upper hand, it will likely attempt to move politics into a Venezuelan scenario, in which the protest is quelled, and the resistance awaits new political momentum, whether elections or other crises.

In another scenario, the Georgian Dream will secure international legitimacy or convince significant portions of Georgian society of its legitimacy

through its propaganda apparatus. The [visit](#) of the Council of Europe Secretary General was leveraged for this purpose, but Alain Berset's clarification that his visit was not an endorsement of the electoral outcomes undercut GD's narrative. Similarly, hopes were pinned on a planned visit by OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Chairperson Pia Kauma. However, the visit was [postponed](#) after Georgian civil society, opposition groups, and several OSCE parliamentary delegations conveyed concerns that GD intended to exploit the meetings to bolster its claims of legitimacy.

In this scenario, Georgian Dream banks on potential recognition from figures like Donald Trump or other Western leaders, hoping such endorsements would dishearten protesters and persuade them to "go home." While this expectation seems overly optimistic, it underscores GD's current focus on the battle for legitimacy. This obsession was evident when Irakli Kobakhidze, addressing a journalist from a critical TV station, demanded recognition as Prime Minister before allowing a question—highlighting how deeply this struggle has permeated the ruling party's priorities.

In a more optimistic scenario for the protesters, the tightening of sanctions and the deepening international isolation of the Georgian Dream leadership could pressure Ivanishvili to step back and use new elections as a bargaining chip. While this outcome would mark a significant victory for the resistance movement, it raises several unresolved questions. When should the elections take place—during the upcoming local elections in the fall 2025, or earlier? How should they be administered, and what new rules are needed to prevent the type of fraud that marred the October 26 elections?

Opposition parties have tentatively agreed that holding new elections under the old rules, without electronic vote counting, might be the most viable solution. However, this approach would require legislative changes, and if the current Parliament

is not recognized as legitimate, it is unclear who would implement such changes. Another option could involve restoring the legitimacy of the 2020–2024 Parliament, but this would require Georgian Dream to acknowledge past electoral fraud—something the ruling party is unlikely to concede.

***The most realistic path forward is to intensify domestic and international pressure on the Georgian Dream. This will increase the political, economic, and diplomatic costs of maintaining the status quo to the point where calling new elections becomes the only viable option for the regime.***

The most realistic path forward is to intensify domestic and international pressure on the Georgian Dream. This will increase the political, economic, and diplomatic costs of maintaining the status quo to the point where calling new elections becomes the only viable option for the regime. However, this will necessitate dialogue and agreement on the timing and rules for those elections, requiring concessions from both sides to break the current impasse.

## A Fractured International Response

Over the 41 days of unrest in Georgia, the international response has been as fragmented as it has been critical, reflecting both solidarity with the Georgian people and the limitations of global diplomacy in confronting authoritarianism. While some countries and institutions have taken decisive action, others remain constrained by internal divisions or geopolitical calculations.

The European Parliament led the charge, [adopting](#) a resolution that unequivocally condemned the Georgian Dream regime's authoritarian turn and

called for new elections. The United States followed suit with a robust set of measures, including the [reintroduction](#) of the Megobari Act and the *Georgian Nightmare Non-recognition Act*, signaling Washington's unwillingness to legitimize the GD's rule. On December 27, U.S. sanctions [targeted](#) Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of GD, under the *Russian Harmful Foreign Activities Sanctions*. These sanctions froze Ivanishvili's assets, blocked transactions linked to his companies, and accused him of aligning Georgia with Moscow's interests while undermining democratic institutions. Earlier, the U.S. had [imposed](#) sanctions on GD officials for orchestrating violent crackdowns on protests and restricting democratic freedoms, including measures under the *Global Magnitsky Act*.

European nations also took significant steps. The Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—acted decisively and timely, [implementing](#) national sanctions against GD officials responsible for suppressing protests. Several Nordic countries [mirrored](#) this approach, while Germany [imposed](#) entry bans on nine individuals implicated in human rights abuses. The UK [added](#) its weight, sanctioning top officials, freezing assets, and suspending defense cooperation with Georgia. These actions underscored a growing consensus among key European players that Georgia's democratic backsliding must not go unanswered.

However, the EU's collective response reveals deep internal fractures. The European Commission [proposed](#) suspending visa-free travel for Georgian officials and their families, highlighting Georgia's serious democratic backsliding. Yet, broader EU sanctions have stalled due to veto threats from Hungary and Slovakia, underscoring the bloc's difficulty in presenting a unified front against authoritarian drift.

Despite these efforts, the Georgian Dream regime appears unyielding. While international sanctions

are significant, they have not yet curbed repression or restored Georgia's democratic trajectory. The question now is whether this patchwork of measures will coalesce into a strategy strong enough to influence the regime or whether Georgia's struggle for democracy will remain a litmus test for the West's resolve.

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## A Need for a Common Western Strategy

The international community must act decisively to counter Georgia's authoritarian turn. At least some building blocks for continuous pressure from Georgia's Western partners must be implemented as part of a wider strategy to counter Russian influence in the region.

(1) *Delegitimize the Georgian Dream regime.* The West must unequivocally reject the October 2024 elections and refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the Georgian Dream-controlled parliament and government. This includes barring Georgian officials from international events and revoking the credentials of Georgian MPs at key forums such as PACE. Such steps would isolate the regime diplomatically and underscore its lack of legitimacy. Any visits or high-level interactions should be suspended until the political crisis is resolved. Georgian officials should not have an opportunity to participate in such events as the Munich Security Conference or GLOBSEC and the bilateral and multilateral parliamentary or Government-to-Government formats must be delayed or canceled.

(2) *Push for New Elections and Prisoner Release.* Western governments must pressure Ivanishvili to release political prisoners and call new elections. This requires abandoning diplomatic niceties and adopting a more confrontational stance. Futile calls for dialogue only embolden the GD regime, while clear, uncompromising demands signal Western resolve.

(3) *Support Democratic Forces.* The EU and its member states should redirect financial and logistical support to civil society organizations, independent media, and opposition groups. Facilitating platforms for Georgian democrats to engage with global policymakers is essential to amplifying their voices and strengthening their position. So far, the promises have been made in this direction, but nothing substantial has happened. Salome Zourabichvili should be received as a legitimate president of Georgia, including at the highest level in the EU countries. This will definitely increase the price of isolation for the Georgian Dream leadership.

(4) *Expand Targeted Sanctions.* The current crisis can only be dispelled if the calculation for Bidzina Ivanishvili changes and he realizes that the increased isolation will hit him financially and his support will crumble. Sanctions are the only viable instrument to this end. Therefore, the Western states must expand sanctions against GD officials and their associates involved in electoral fraud and human rights abuses.

The EU member states, bilaterally or at the EU level, should target Bidzina Ivanishvili and his assets, as already done by the United States. In addition, however, more individuals and groups near Mr. Ivanishvili can be targeted. These groups include:

**False Witness Police Officers:** This will undermine the current vicious cycle on which the arrest and mistreatment of the protesters is based. The police officers routinely provide false testimonies in the

courts, claiming that they arrested the protesters when, in reality, the special tasks department arrests and beats the protesters. The courts never pay attention to the fact that the chest cameras of the police officers are offline, despite the duty to have them turned on during the arrests. This system is coordinated by the legal unit of the Police Department.

**Heads of Special Tasks Department Units:** The Western partners should impose travel bans on the mid-rank leadership of the Special Tasks Department, which is known for exceeding force, illegally detaining the protesters, and treating them inhumanly. At least one high-level Department head resigned and fled the country; therefore, his testimonies could be instrumental in creating such lists.

**Georgian Dream Propagandists:** The Western sanctions should target individuals disseminating state propaganda that undermines democracy. The state propaganda rests on the Imedi TV and PosTV, as well as the Georgian Public Broadcaster and Rustavi 2. These TV stations have been instrumental in spreading anti-Western propaganda, promoting hatred towards the West, justifying violence by the GD, and demonizing democracy defenders, as well as spreading anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian messages. Imposing travel bans and financial sanctions on them would seriously undermine their credibility in Georgia. It would serve as a cold shower for many propagandists, such as Irakli Rukhadze, owner of the Imedi TV, who is an American citizen and runs several companies in the UK.

**Georgian Dream's Political Council Members:** Sanctions similar to those under the Magnitsky Act or the measures against Bidzina Ivanishvili could also be extended to the Georgian Dream political council members. This would serve not only as a symbolic step but would also create a serious wedge in the GD leadership, who are collectively



responsible for the country's democratic backsliding and crackdown on the peaceful protesters. A recent [statement](#) by the GD political council, a combination of propaganda lies and conspiracy theories, is a clear testament to the state of affairs in the party. The statement accused a so-called "global war party" and its "Deep State metastases" of controlling these actions, framing them as part of a broader conspiracy to destabilize Georgia and force the country into a devastating war. It also alleged that all critics of the Georgian government, whether international or domestic, are members of this network, driven not by their nations' interests but by the agenda of the global war party.

**National Bank Chairperson:** Natia Turnava, a former minister of economy, has played a key role in transforming the relatively independent National Bank of Georgia (NBG) into a fully compliant tool of Georgian Dream. Under her leadership, the National Bank has depleted national reserves to ease political pressure on the government and facilitated the establishment of mechanisms enabling the US-sanctioned former prosecutor general, Otar Partskhaladze, to bypass Western financial sanctions.

**GD-affiliated Businesses:** Bidzina Ivanishvili and his family's business empire have not fully been targeted in the West. The Kartu Group (including the Kartu Bank), its leadership, and the construction businesses owned by Ivanishvili's family members have avoided sanctions so far. The imposition of targeted financial sanctions on these individuals will seriously undermine the financial support for the Georgian Dream and serve as a serious warning for the Georgian business community.

## Geopolitical Stakes

Georgia's current trajectory holds significant consequences for regional stability and the global democratic landscape. Should the Georgian Dream re-

gime further entrench its power, the country risks becoming a de facto satellite of Moscow, weakening Western sanctions and bolstering Russia's strategic position in the Black Sea region. Such a scenario would erode the EU's influence in the South Caucasus, creating a power vacuum ripe for exploitation by Russia and its proxies.

***Controlling Georgia's strategic ports and transit routes could allow Russia (and China) to tighten its grip on regional trade and communications, amplifying its leverage over Europe and the South Caucasus.***

The stakes are particularly high as Georgia's location makes it a critical link in the energy and transport corridors connecting Europe and Asia. A GD regime aligned with Moscow could jeopardize projects like the Southern Gas Corridor and Middle Corridor and weaken Europe's ability to diversify its energy sources away from Russia. Furthermore, controlling Georgia's strategic ports and transit routes could allow Russia (and China) to tighten its grip on regional trade and communications, amplifying its leverage over Europe and the South Caucasus. For Western powers, losing Georgia to authoritarian influence would not only represent a strategic defeat but also compromise efforts to build a secure and independent region resistant to Kremlin ambitions.

***The failure of Western democracies to decisively support Georgian reformers risks disillusioning a population that has long identified itself as part of the European family.***

Domestically, the crisis in Georgia is not only about governance but about the survival of democratic values in a region long plagued by instability. The GD regime's continued crackdowns on opposition,

civil society, and media have alienated a majority of the Georgian population and signaled to the world that democratic backsliding can occur even in countries with strong pro-European aspirations. The failure of Western democracies to decisively support Georgian reformers risks disillusioning a population that has long identified itself as part of the European family. This lack of support could ultimately drive Georgian society into the arms of the very authoritarianism it has fought against for decades.

The crisis also has broader ramifications for the global democratic order. If the West fails to act,

authoritarian regimes worldwide will see this as an endorsement of their playbook: eroding institutions, silencing dissent, and aligning with hostile powers to undermine global stability. The Georgian case serves as a litmus test for whether Western democracies can uphold their principles and counter authoritarian influence. As Georgian protesters rally for a European future despite crackdowns, their struggle is a reminder that the battle for democracy is far from confined to national borders—it is a global fight that demands a united and resolute strategy ■

# Georgia Is Living Its 1848 Moment

**O**n 23 December, about 100 businessmen gathered in the Georgian government building for a tense meeting with Irakli Kobakhidze, a man in a deep crisis of legitimacy. Kobakhidze, who was elected prime minister by a rump parliament composed only of ruling party deputies, is trying to crush a civil resistance movement that has been growing for over a month. The brutal crackdown by the police forces brought Kobakhidze and his patron, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, the simmering disdain of Georgians and put their close henchmen on sanctions lists, but failed to break the resolve of the citizens. Worse, the shadow of sanctions and the associated complication of access to financial markets is worrying the Georgian business community upon whose tacit approval the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) has counted while capturing state institutions over the past decade.

In fact, nominally, the GD has had a good economic run. Growth rates were not stellar but quite respectable, given the COVID-19 shock and foreign policy upheavals. [According](#) to the World Bank, Georgia's real GDP growth averaged 4.7 percent

during 2011-2022. Except for the 2020 contraction linked to the COVID-19 shock, Georgia outperformed upper-middle-income countries and the ECA region in terms of average per capita GDP growth – 4.5% in 2016-2022.

The influx of wealthy Russians after the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine brought much-needed liquidity to the market and boosted construction, banking, retail, and real estate. Research by the International School of Economics (ISET) at Tbilisi State University [shows](#) that financial remittances from Russia stood at over USD 2 billion in 2022, real estate sales prices jumped by around 30%, and rental prices by 120% in the last three months of 2022. Nearly 110 thousand Russians opened bank accounts in Georgia in February-December 2022.

Windfall profits did not last long – they leveled off and then [fell sharply](#) in 2024 – but they kept big businesses happy and the well-connected could count on lavish public contracts in exchange for funneling some of that money back into the ruling party's coffers as donations, [according](#) to Transparency International Georgia, a watchdog.



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As the Georgian Dream party increasingly subordinated the state apparatus, budget payouts were used to boost social spending, create civil service sinecures, and keep the police and military happy with growing salaries and housing projects. This well-oiled system came into play on 26 October when the Georgian Dream pulled out all the stops, legal and illegal, to secure a “majority” in the new legislature.

But many Georgians had grown weary of the increasingly divisive government, angered by its virulent anti-Western rhetoric and its coziness with the Kremlin. Ivanishvili’s bet on Russia’s eventual victory in the Ukraine conflict does not sit well with the country. Not only is it a bet on the victory of the traditional enemy of Georgian statehood, but more importantly, it means a radical transformation of the relatively free way of life that many middle-class Georgians have grown accustomed to over the past 20 or so years.

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And that is why large sections of the middle class do not like it. From IT specialists to NGO types, from academics to yoga instructors, they have stood and marched in their tens of thousands, braving tear gas, water cannons, and beatings. [up to 500](#) have been arrested, including renowned doctors, actors, historians... Private and social funds have sprung up to cover the costs of their fines and medical treatment.

All this is also bad for big(ger) businesses: hotels are empty of richer tourists (the many excited

but poor Western journalists are no consolation). Some major Western investors, such as Heidelberg Cement, have [pulled out](#), and British and US Treasury sanctions are scaring off potential investors.

## Taxation Without Representation?

Vladimir Lenin famously described the “revolutionary situation” as a state in which “the top cannot govern and the bottom does not want to be governed.” If the man were alive today, he might be tempted to describe the situation in Georgia as a budding “bourgeois revolution” similar to that of 1848 in which the growing middle class, contributing more and more to the state coffers, demands more rights from an oppressive autocrat. But is this analogy accurate? Is the oligarchic rule of Bidzina Ivanishvili comparable to the absolute monarchs of yesteryear?

Economic data from Geostat, a national statistical agency, [suggest](#) that the share of small and medium businesses in the Georgian economy and, more importantly, in filling the state coffers with tax revenues has been growing. In 2023, small and medium enterprises accounted for 33% of turnover and 53% of output and added value. The same data shows that medium and small enterprises employ nearly 60% of those working in the business sector – over 490 thousand people. Of course, many Georgians who work in large companies also make up Georgia’s middle class, and not all of those in small enterprises do, but this gives an approximate figure.

**Unlike China (and Russia), the Georgian middle class has largely looked to the West when making life choices and envisioning their country’s future.**

Many of these Georgians benefited from the country’s relatively liberal taxation, smooth bureaucra-

cy, and low corruption. All this came with Western-inspired reforms, often supported by Western money and training. True, economic liberalism does not have to come with a liberal way of life, but unlike China (and Russia), the Georgian middle class has largely looked to the West when making life choices and envisioning their country’s future.

And not only Georgians: over 30 thousand Russian companies [were set up](#) in the country after the Kremlin’s new invasion of Ukraine, and over 20 thousand are reported as active. They also sought to take advantage of this liberal climate and potential opening towards the EU market. The statistics are not yet available but anecdotal evidence [suggests](#) that many have relocated closer to Europe following Georgia’s anti-European turn.

In addition, hundreds of thousands of Georgians living in Europe and the United States transfer millions in foreign currency to their relatives in Georgia, helping to fuel the banking and real estate markets. Net annual transfers from the EU countries hover around 40–45% and from the US around 10–18% since 2020, with the amount of inflow transfers from the EU over USD 1 billion in 2024 and from the US reaching USD 50 million, [according](#) to the National Bank of Georgia.

True, Georgia’s middle class is not very large, but they balk at the idea that the government – captured by the Georgian Dream – is using their tax money to finance the police who gas them and the thugs who beat them in the dark alleys of the capital.

Moreover, the Georgian Dream has channeled middle-class revenues to [expand](#) social assistance to Georgians living in precarious conditions – often the people in the suburbs and rural areas who form the electoral backbone of the ruling party’s increasingly authoritarian, nativist, and conservative base.

Worse, in the midst of the crisis, the ruling par-

ty has made it clear that it intends to use state coffers to protect its loyalists from the sanctions regime. Rules were relaxed to allow pension fund savings to be channeled into riskier investments. GD Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [announced](#) that a fund would be set up to compensate police and security officials for damages caused by sanctions imposed for brutalizing protesters. News like this does not go down well with people who pay for state services and instead receive ridicule and beatings.

So far, calls for traditional responses to repression, such as strikes, have fallen flat. Part of this is due to the structure of the economy. The middle class is self-employed or in small businesses; when they strike, they are hurting their own businesses, not the government. On the other hand, the types of enterprises that can go on strike - municipal transport, miners, etc. - are either beholden to the meager salaries provided by the state or have previously experienced little sympathy and solidarity from the urban middle class. The Georgian labor code, though updated to meet EU requirements, makes it very difficult to strike legally, exposing potential strikers to arbitrary arrests. Nevertheless, initiatives are emerging - thousands of civil servants have [announced](#) the new independent trade union to defend the interests of those dismissed for political reasons.

## The Rush to Form Alliances

History teaches us that the “Springtime of Nations” of 1848 failed in European countries because creaking monarchies sought and found alliances with big capital or culturally conservative landowners. The ascendant bourgeoisie, for its part, often failed to generate solidarity with the oppressed urban precariat.

The willingness of the Georgian Dream’s leaders to listen to big business and even accept criticism is

a sign that Bidzina Ivanishvili’s oligarchic regime is trying to tap into this sociologically and economically natural reservoir of support.

***The willingness of the Georgian Dream’s leaders to listen to big business and even accept criticism is a sign that Bidzina Ivanishvili’s oligarchic regime is trying to tap into this sociologically and economically natural reservoir of support.***

So far, Ivanishvili’s considerable personal capital has acted as a stabilizing anchor for his party. There is no reliable information on whether or not he has injected his personal money into the Georgian political system. Common sense dictates that the redistribution of tax revenues, favoritism in the allocation of state contracts, and some “black money” from gray market operations (cryptocurrency mining, which Ivanishvili controls, as well as perhaps some favors to Russian colleagues to circumvent sanctions) should have been sufficient to maintain the patronage network.

But the situation is different now. Panicky undertones [were heard](#) from the businessman who underpins the party’s propaganda, who said that Georgian Dream’s story of a global conspiracy to drag the country into war with Russia sounded like “madness.” Few of the big companies seem willing to lose access to credit because of US sanctions in exchange for uncertain substitute inflows from China or Iran. They may become reluctant allies of the middle-class protest and support efforts to normalize the political situation by getting rid of the most virulently anti-Western figureheads of the GD. However, they may be unwilling to fundamentally change the political system that guarantees them access to the “big boss” with ultimate decision-making power and shields them from unwanted scrutiny.

To win this political battle on their terms, the mid-

dle-class protesters need to mobilize the broader nation to shift the political balance. So far, they have gained an important political asset - public sympathy.

But their economic situation is fragile - their savings will not allow them to stay in the streets indefinitely, nor could they finance the solidarity funds in the long run. The Georgian expatriate community, which broadly supports the bourgeois political struggle at home, could throw a crucial lifeline by diverting some of its remittances to the common cause. This has already happened to some extent through mutual support initiatives on social media.

Another way for the middle class to influence the state directly is to stop paying taxes before their political demands are met. This is a risky endeavor that exposes them to legal sanctions, but it can be made easier if the civil service shows solidarity.

The lack of political vehicles is also a major concern. The old opposition parties and alliances that ran in the 26 October elections have proven inefficient, poorly managed, and out of touch with their support bases. They have struggled to keep up with protests and have little credibility as effective channels for broader interests. Reforming the party system would take time.

***The fact that the protests have spread beyond Tbilisi to distant towns is a small but significant sign that the disquiet over GD's destructive policies is taking root.***

So far, the attitude of the "average Georgian," the very people the Georgian Dream sought to mobilize with its anti-Western and anti-LGBT populism, remains elusive. Yet, it may prove decisive. Do they feel betrayed by the GD, which promised stability but has struggled to hold the country together? Are

they dismayed by the violence? Can they be mobilized to suppress middle-class opposition, are they willing to stand by as police repression intensifies, or are they demobilized and ready to accept any outcome that feels peaceful? The fact that the protests have spread beyond Tbilisi to distant towns is a small but significant sign that the disquiet over GD's destructive policies is taking root. But the urban middle class has only just woken up to the need to build bonds of solidarity with "ordinary Georgians." Perhaps too late to guarantee victory at this turn in history.

## The Politics of a Small State

Georgia is a small state in a highly contested region. Despite Ivanishvili's personal wealth, the country does not have the natural riches like Venezuela or human resources like Iran to withstand Western sanctions, even in the medium term.

The political crisis triggered by the decision to halt EU accession shows no signs of abating. The Georgian Dream is now experiencing a crisis of legitimacy both at home and abroad. There is a general feeling that the current state of affairs is unsustainable.

***If top GD officials—perhaps including Ivanishvili himself—are sanctioned in the coming months, the Georgian Dream will be pushed to the breaking point.***

The Georgian Dream gambled on a change in the US administration to reset relations. But the violence it has unleashed at home, coupled with continued peddling of anti-American conspiracies, seems to have dashed that hope. If top GD officials—perhaps including Ivanishvili himself—are sanctioned in the coming months, the Georgian Dream will be pushed to the breaking point.

If that happens, Ivanishvili may move to protect his country behind the shield of regional autocracies—for example, by joining the 3+3 format involving Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, with Azerbaijan as a sub-regional power and Armenia and Georgia as poor(er) supplicants.

But given the willpower demonstrated by the resistance in the streets of Tbilisi and other cities, this decision will not be his alone. Could and would the US and the EU step in to support Georgia's civic awakening? The jury is out ■



# Is Russia Behind Georgia's Geopolitical Realignment?

Few things provoke Georgians more than a direct affront to their European aspirations. Yet, this is precisely what the self-proclaimed Georgian Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, delivered on 28 November 2024. In an unprecedented move for a candidate country, he [officially](#) announced Georgia's withdrawal from EU accession talks, declaring a "time-out" until 2028. Kobakhidze characterized the EU's conditionality as 'blackmail,' asserting that Georgia has had enough of it. He claimed that his government was no longer willing to be under constant EU pressure, indirectly admitting that the accession requirements represented an unwelcome irritant for a ruling party preoccupied with consolidating power and altering the country's foreign policy trajectory. Unsurprisingly, the streets of Georgia erupted in [protest](#), exacerbating an ongoing political and constitutional crisis that had been simmering since the contested parliamentary elections in October. Equally predict-

ably, both domestic and international observers began speculating about potential Russian influence. Why would a ruling party, already facing the test of legitimacy, an outraged electorate, and a plummeting reputation, take a step almost sure to backfire—unless prompted by external forces?

**Russian and GD officials have presented a unified front, advancing the familiar narrative of a Western-backed regime change.**

Suspiciousness has grown as Moscow openly voiced support for the Georgian Dream (GD), echoing Tbilisi's claims that ongoing protests are an externally orchestrated insurgency against a democratically elected government. Russian and GD officials have presented a unified front, advancing the familiar narrative of a Western-backed regime change. Georgia's president has repeatedly point-



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ed to Russian interference, describing the October parliamentary elections as a [“Russian hybrid operation.”](#) While some in Western policy circles share her assessment, others remain skeptical. Despite widespread speculation and allegations of behind-the-scenes Russian interference, no concrete evidence on the scale seen in Moldova or Romania has surfaced in Georgia. Longtime Georgia observer, Thomas de Waal, for instance, [suggested](#) that *“It’s a business relationship—there’s no diplomatic relationship. Things are going on behind the scenes, but they’re more afraid of Russia than wanting to join Russia.”* Similarly, Neil MacFarlane has [argued](#) that the GD and its founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili, are driven more by personal interests than Moscow’s. *“Ivanishvili is neither pro-Russian nor pro-Western,”* MacFarlane noted. *“He is pro-Ivanishvili.”*

Nonetheless, questions linger about the nature and extent of Ivanishvili’s ties to Russia. Is Moscow the driving force behind Georgia’s shift toward anti-Western authoritarianism or is this transformation an entirely homegrown phenomenon? Are we attributing undue influence to Russia, inadvertently amplifying its reach while overlooking the agency of local actors? And to what extent, if any, have Western policies contributed to the current crisis?

***The nature of Russia’s influence projection in Georgia and beyond can best be understood through three interconnected factors: domestic proxies, external enablers, and a perceived lack of Western resolve.***

Those seeking direct material evidence of Russian interference in Georgian politics—such as Kremlin-issued instructions, widespread vote-buying schemes during elections, or large-scale social media operations—will be disappointed. The nature of Russia’s influence projection in Georgia and beyond can best be understood through three

interconnected factors: domestic proxies, external enablers, and a perceived lack of Western resolve. Russia skillfully exploits the interplay of these elements in each specific context to undermine Western interests. Examining these factors in the case of Georgia helps uncover Russia’s hidden trail and offers insights into the mechanisms of Russian influence projection more broadly.

## **The Georgian Dream as a Russian Asset**

Russia’s influence operations abroad are typically covert rather than overt, characterized by several replicable strategies. These include reliance on domestic actors—whether in government or opposition, acting as Russia’s proxies; a strong informational and ideological presence in local media, often amplified by Russia-affiliated outlets and social media networks; and the provision of direct or indirect economic incentives. Acting as a Russian proxy does not negate the agency of local actors. On the contrary, Russia values them precisely because of their agency which can be leveraged to advance Moscow’s strategic interests. This dynamic makes them valuable partners, particularly when their domestic political ambitions align with broader Russian objectives.

In the case of Georgia, Russia historically relied on economic, military, and diplomatic pressure to maintain influence, as none of Georgia’s governments aligned with Moscow, and pro-Russian political forces remained too marginal to merit significant investment. Following the 2008 war, Georgia severed diplomatic ties with Russia, withdrew from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and committed itself to European and Euro-Atlantic integration. At the time, strong pro-Western and anti-Russian public sentiment made Georgia appear to be a lost cause for Moscow. However, the situation has changed drastically in recent years as the Georgian Dream emerged

as Russia's most valuable asset in the South Caucasus. The alignment of the GD's domestic agenda with Russian geopolitical interests has allowed Moscow to exert influence and make geopolitical gains that took many by surprise.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked the beginning of Georgia's geopolitical U-turn. Motivated by either personal fears of Russia or a growing sense of rejection by the West, Bidzina Ivanishvili began to view the Western—particularly European—democratization agenda as unwelcome interference in domestic affairs, directly conflicting with his desire to maintain power. What began as “restrained neutrality” in the war escalated into a near-total breakdown of relations with the West. Simultaneously, the regime survival agenda became increasingly aligned with Russia's interests, favoring Georgia's distancing from the West and returning to Moscow's sphere of influence. To rephrase Neil MacFarlane, being “pro-Ivanishvili” became indistinguishable from being “pro-Russian.”

This alignment with Russia began with the Georgian Dream's ideological shift from center-left to far-right, adopting Russian narratives of sovereign democracy, traditional values, anti-liberalism, and anti-LGBTQ populism. Leveraging its parliamentary supermajority, the GD enacted Russian-style laws on foreign influence, LGBTQ propaganda, and public protests, dismissing criticism from Brussels as [Soviet-style colonialism](#). Concurrently, Georgia restored economic and energy dependence on Russia, reinstating leverage Moscow had lost since 2008. Georgia's foreign policy alignment with the European Union sharply dropped, replaced by increasing alignment with Russia. To further consolidate power, Ivanishvili [threatened](#) to outlaw pro-Western opposition parties and prosecute their members. Emulating Putin's playbook, he established a “constructive” opposition in the form of the GD's ultra-right-wing People's Power faction, appointing one of its leaders as Georgia's president. With the presidential inauguration on

29 December, the GD effectively completed its capture of all state institutions, bolstered by robust information campaigns through party-affiliated media outlets.

***As Russia's uncontested dominance in the South Caucasus has waned due to Azerbaijan's restoration of territorial integrity, Türkiye's growing influence, and Armenia's gradual distancing from Moscow, Georgia's geopolitical transformation under the GD has become Russia's most significant gain, partially offsetting these relative losses.***

Russia has little need to seek alternative proxies in Georgia or allocate additional resources to project influence. The Georgian Dream remains the most significant, well-resourced, and popular political party, effectively controlling the country while steering it toward Russia's orbit. As Russia's uncontested dominance in the South Caucasus has waned due to Azerbaijan's restoration of territorial integrity, Türkiye's growing influence, and Armenia's gradual distancing from Moscow, Georgia's geopolitical transformation under the GD has become Russia's most significant gain, partially offsetting these relative losses. If the GD retains power, Georgia can become Russia's principal aid in its efforts to push Western influence out of the region.

## External Enablers: The Role of Hungary

Hungary has served as one of the enablers for Russia's success in Georgia. In a country where support for European integration remains consistently high and pro-Russian sentiments are nearly nonexistent, adopting an overtly pro-Russian stance would amount to political suicide. To

navigate this, the Georgian Dream maintained a democratic façade and prioritized European integration—at least rhetorically—until after the elections. To bolster this image, the GD needed visible allies within Europe who could lobby for its EU accession and demonstrate that its anti-liberal, conservative agenda was still compatible with European values. Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, provided exactly what was needed.

***For the Georgian Dream, Hungary has served as both an example and an alibi for its growing ideological and geopolitical alignment with Russia.***

When Hungary enacts Russian-style legislation—such as laws on transparency of foreign influence or restrictions on LGBTQ rights—it provides a blueprint for other governments with autocratic tendencies but pro-European populations to emulate and justify. For the Georgian Dream, Hungary has served as both an example and an alibi for its growing ideological and geopolitical alignment with Russia. Moreover, Orbán [blocked](#) EU sanctions against the GD and provided diplomatic support, allowing the GD to operate as a de facto Russian proxy with minimal repercussions both domestically and internationally.

The relationship between the Georgian Dream and Viktor Orbán has not been one-sided but rather mutually beneficial, making Georgia one of Orbán's notable foreign policy successes. While Hungary has shielded Georgia from international criticism for its democratic backsliding and drift toward Russia, Orbán has gained from the proliferation of like-minded regimes in Europe's neighborhood. This dynamic has bolstered his reputation as a leading champion of European anti-liberalism and populist conservatism. Furthermore, Orbán has positioned himself as the only European leader

actively engaging with and influencing the GD. In a striking [show of solidarity](#), he traveled to Tbilisi after the elections, even as other EU partners refused to recognize the legitimacy of the vote. Against the background of widespread hesitancy to recognize the outcome of the October elections, his visit only highlighted the increasingly isolated position of Tbilisi, making it particularly susceptible to Russian influence.

***Whether intentional or not, Hungary has served as an effective conduit for advancing Russia's interests both within the EU and in Georgia.***

Whether intentional or not, Hungary has served as an effective conduit for advancing Russia's interests both within the EU and in Georgia. Hungary has repeatedly undermined European solidarity and unity with respect to both Ukraine and Georgia while exemplifying how a country can remain part of the institutional West yet pursue anti-Western policies. It has aided the Georgian Dream in dismantling Georgian democracy and, by doing so, delivered an invaluable gift to Vladimir Putin. Russia understands that Georgia's primary strategic value lies in its potential as a European-style liberal democracy in a frontline region where competition for resources, political influence, and control over connectivity infrastructure is intensifying. For the West, Georgia's importance is not solely derived from its strategic location or connectivity potential—which are not unmatched—but from its capacity to develop into an institutional democracy that can resist Kremlin influence and serve as a model for other countries in the region. Georgia's backsliding from a democracy into a Russian-style autocracy under the GD is eroding this strategic value. Isolated from the West and devoid of its democratic appeal, Georgia risks becoming easy prey for regional hegemony.

## International Context and Western Resolve

The policies of the Georgian Dream and the accompanying rhetoric represent more than a quiet choice in favor of Russia; they are an open challenge to the West. This makes the GD a particularly valuable asset for Russia which is fighting not only to subjugate Ukraine but also to redefine the parameters of the new world order. Putin was quick to note with satisfaction how much he admires the audacity of the GD officials who stand their ground against the West. Georgia's challenge, replete with accusations of Western hypocrisy, moral decay, and general dysfunction, can be easily dismissed as an eccentricity of a small state run by a paranoid millionaire. It is, however, a sign of a global malaise. It is a concrete manifestation of a growing perception that the world is moving beyond Western hegemony and towards greater multipolarity with China forming not only an alternative center of power but also an alternative model of governance that can deliver prosperity and economic development without democracy or human rights.

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Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine tested Western resolve to defend the rules-based order and deter Russia's revanchism. The perception of Western hesitancy to act swiftly and decisively created a sense of uncertainty about the outcome

of the war and led many states to hedge their bets. Georgia was one of them. It seems that Ivanishvili believed from day one that Russia could not and would not be defeated and that it would be wise to placate rather than irritate an emboldened and aggressive great power next door. He successfully exploited the fear of the renewed war with Russia among the Georgian public in his election campaign and managed to project the image of a pragmatic and careful politician who would not take unnecessary risks. He did not, however, reveal the fact that Russian victory and concomitant Western weakening were also his preferred outcomes. For autocratic leaders bent on maintaining power and dominating the economic resources of their countries, multipolarity is an opportunity rather than a threat.

***The EU was slow to recognize the strategic importance of Georgia's membership for its regional influence. This reluctance resulted in missed opportunities that are now challenging to recover.***

The war has also redefined the balance of power in the South Caucasus and intensified competition with the increasing political and economic weight of Türkiye, China, and Iran. However, all actors, while competing with each other, seem to converge on the desire to keep the West out of the region. The only exception is Armenia but its options are limited, especially as Georgia joins the ranks of an informal anti-Western regional alignment despite formally being the EU candidate country. The EU was slow to recognize the strategic importance of Georgia's membership for its regional influence. This reluctance resulted in missed opportunities that are now challenging to recover. Failing to seize the next opportunity could come at a high cost for both Georgians and the European Union ■

# The Vacuum of Indecision: Western Policy at a Crossroads

**T**he Western policy of strategic ambiguity—a deliberate avoidance of clear communication and decisive action on key geopolitical issues—usually aims to deter conflict and maintain flexibility for diplomatic maneuvering. However, recently, this approach has increasingly backfired, creating uncertainty among allies and adversaries alike. Rather than preventing escalation, it has emboldened authoritarian regimes to exploit the resulting policy void, capitalizing on confusion and inaction. This indecision has left crises to fester, providing openings for regimes such as Russia, China, and Iran to assert themselves globally.

***Georgia has become a recent example of authoritarian regimes exploiting Western ambiguities.***

Western nations and institutions have often disguised their inability to achieve consensus by persistently delaying decision-making. The inefficient

handling of crises in Ukraine and Georgia underscores the consequences of this vacuum. As the ongoing war in Ukraine reshapes the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical landscape, the flaws in ambiguous Western strategy are starkly apparent, demanding a critical reassessment. Georgia has become a recent example of authoritarian regimes exploiting Western ambiguities.

## Redefining the Euro-Atlantic Security Posture

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has profoundly reshaped security perceptions across the Euro-Atlantic region, underscoring the imperative for NATO and EU member states to bolster their defense capabilities. The war was pivotal in prompting nations to reassess their military expenditures and strategic postures. In response to the heightened threat from Russia, several European countries have significantly increased their defense budgets. For ex-



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ample, Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government has proposed [expanding](#) the Bundeswehr to 230,000 troops, up from the current target of 203,000, as part of NATO's efforts to strengthen Allied forces. At the same time, Poland nearly [doubled](#) its military spending from USD 15 billion to USD 27 billion in 2023. Substantial increases indicate a collective acknowledgment of the need to strengthen military capabilities in light of the ongoing war. With the incoming Trump presidency, the pressure on Europe will likely mount on increasing defense spending even further.

Despite the surge in defense expenditures, strategic ambiguity continues to pervade Western defense and security policies. This ambiguity manifests in indecisiveness in decision-making and inconsistent policy implementation. Persistent variations in threat perception and political appetite among member states have led to fragmented

approaches, diluting the overall strategic coherence of the alliance. Prolonged deliberations and lack of consensus have delayed critical decisions, undermining the effectiveness of the increased defense budgets. Such indecisiveness hampers the West's ability to respond promptly and effectively to security challenges in the face of the most pressing and severe crises.

Despite Russia's strategic failure in Ukraine and the exposure of significant weaknesses in its military apparatus, the Western policy of strategic ambiguity has remained largely unchanged. Three main factors contribute to this continued indecisiveness.

First, Russia's effective manipulations of the information space, including disinformation campaigns and psychological warfare, have succeeded in scaring various segments of Western societies.



These efforts pressure policymakers to adopt passive and defensive stances favorable to Russia as they seek to avoid domestic unrest and political fallout fueled by manipulated public perceptions.

Second, Russia's ability to escalate and use force, particularly its nuclear posturing, still effectively deters many European countries from taking bold steps against Russian aggression. The fear of provoking a larger confrontation, including the possibility of nuclear escalation, constrains Western decision-making despite Russia's demonstrated impotence.

Third, decades of defense cuts across Europe have left militaries and defense industries in a deplorable state, unable to meet the demands of a large-scale crisis. Rebuilding these capabilities cannot be achieved overnight; most European militaries are unlikely to be prepared for robust self-defense for at least four to five years. This acknowledgment of their vulnerabilities, lack of readiness to face a direct crisis, and [overreliance](#) on US military power contribute significantly to the ongoing policy ambiguity and hesitation.

***The persistence of indecisiveness and fragmented approaches in Western strategy undermines the effectiveness of these investments, missing an opportunity to capitalize on Russia's vulnerabilities and reinforce regional security architectures.***

Ukraine's resilient defense has highlighted operational setbacks within the Russian military, diminished Moscow's regional influence, and increased the potential of neighboring countries to resist coercion. However, the persistence of indecisiveness and fragmented approaches in Western strategy undermines the effectiveness of these investments, missing an opportunity to capitalize on Russia's vulnerabilities and reinforce regional security architectures.

## Russia's Expanding Influence Before and After the Invasion of Ukraine

Before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia systematically expanded its influence across the post-Soviet space and beyond through a coercive hybrid warfare strategy, aggression, and destabilization. Exploiting the West's indecisive and ambiguous responses to its aggressive actions, Moscow [leveraged](#) protracted conflicts and political deception to assert control over its neighbors.

***One of the earliest examples of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy was Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. By occupying the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia not only cemented its military presence but also effectively blocked Georgia and Ukraine's NATO aspirations.***

One of the earliest examples of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy was Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. By occupying the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia not only cemented its military presence but also effectively blocked Georgia and Ukraine's NATO aspirations. The lack of serious consequences for the invasion emboldened Russia further, leading to the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas in 2014. Once again, the Western response was weak and ambiguous, exemplified by the prolonged and inconclusive Minsk negotiations, which failed to achieve concrete results.

Another case illustrating Russia's successful manipulation of conflicts is the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite decades of Western mediation efforts, Russia maintained control of the situation on the ground.

During the 2020 escalation, Moscow brokered a ceasefire on its terms, ultimately stationing its peacekeepers in Azerbaijan while tightening its grip on Armenia even more. Similarly, in Belarus, the West's failure to decisively support the pro-democracy opposition during the 2020 protests allowed Russia to reinforce Alexander Lukashenko's regime, further consolidating its influence.

***This (mis)calculation by Moscow is the most unmistakable evidence that strategic ambiguity and Western indecisiveness did not dissuade Russia but instead provoked its aggression.***

These victories and the consistent failure of the Western policy of strategic ambiguity convinced Moscow that the ground was prepared for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia believed it could reestablish its sphere of exclusive influence in its so-called "near abroad," significantly advancing its vision of regional dominance. One of the primary variables in Russia's decision to launch its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was its confidence that the West was unprepared to intervene decisively or meaningfully assist Ukraine. Moscow calculated that the West's fragmented approach and delayed responses would allow it to achieve its goals without facing significant opposition. This (mis)calculation by Moscow is the most unmistakable evidence that strategic ambiguity and Western indecisiveness did not dissuade Russia but instead provoked its aggression.

## **A Turning Point: Russia Confronted by Real Opposition**

In February 2022, Russia faced significant and organized resistance to its aggression for the first time in recent history, save Georgia's five-day-long effort to hold its military in August 2008. Ukraine's heroic defense, supported by Western

military aid, led to a strategic disaster for Russia. Moscow failed to achieve any of its objectives in Ukraine, exposing deep vulnerabilities in its military and political strategies. The consequences of this failure reverberated across the region, triggering a domino effect that undermined Russia's influence in multiple areas.

Azerbaijan, with Türkiye's support, regained control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia, disillusioned by Russia's inability to assist during the conflict, began pivoting westward, revising decades of dependency on Moscow. Russia's efforts to install pro-Russian leadership in Moldova and Romania through disinformation and covert influence campaigns have largely failed, signaling the limits of its hybrid strategies in resilient states. In Moldova, the election of pro-European president Maia Sandu dealt a blow to Moscow's ambitions, with her government actively reducing Russian influence and pursuing EU integration. Similarly, strong public support for NATO and the EU in Romania thwarted Kremlin-backed attempts to sway the political landscape.

As the ripple effects of its failures in Ukraine extended beyond the region, Russia's influence in Syria also collapsed in December 2024, with Moscow compelled to diminish its military presence – a cornerstone of its regional influence in the Middle East. These setbacks, failures, and degrading influences highlight a growing resistance to Russian interference as Russia remains fully consumed by its war in Ukraine, which has strained its capacity to maintain or expand its influence. The erosion of Russia's power and prestige underscores the impact of confronting its aggression with clear opposition and force for the first time. However, the Western policy of strategic ambiguity is still well in place. These developments have not necessarily resulted in improved or more effective Western policies, leaving the longer-term dynamics of Russian influence uncertain.

## The Deficiencies of Western Strategic Ambiguity in Ukraine

**Western leaders have failed to explicitly define whether assistance aims to help Ukraine resist Russian aggression indefinitely or to achieve victory.**

Three years into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the West still lacks a clear and unified objective in its support for Kyiv. Western leaders have failed to explicitly define whether assistance aims to help Ukraine resist Russian aggression indefinitely or to achieve victory. This ambiguity has left a critical question unanswered: What would victory for Ukraine and the West look like? Western efforts remain reactive and fragmented without clearly articulated goals, undermining their overall effectiveness. The European Union, in particular, has struggled to demonstrate unity with member states like Hungary and Slovakia, frequently sabotaging collective decisions and echoing Russian narratives. This internal discord weakens the EU's ability to present a strong, cohesive front against Russia and hinders effective, coordinated support for Ukraine, further exacerbating the lack of strategic clarity.

On the other hand, Trump's special envoy Keith Kellogg's proposed peace plan, [suggesting](#) granting Ukraine security guarantees in exchange for delaying NATO membership and accepting Russia's temporary control over the occupied territories. This is another example of strategic ambiguity, which has so far proven disastrous. While this may offer a temporary pathway toward stability, the ambiguity surrounding security guarantees jeopardizes the whole plan. The plan's inherent contradiction lies in sidelining NATO while offering alternative guarantees that are neither clear nor can they be more credible than the already [violated](#) Budapest Memorandum. This raises the ques-

tion: why should NATO's guarantees be excluded if other equally credible guarantees are being provided? Moreover, the proposal seems to contradict Ukraine's interests and also fails to align with Russia's declared objectives, making it difficult to envision how this approach could lead to sustainable peace or even be implemented in the medium run.

This lack of clarity creates a core problem for strategic planning. Defense planners can only devise actionable strategies, allocate resources, and identify necessary tools when they know precisely what needs to be achieved. The absence of clear objectives explains why decisions about providing specific weapon systems and determining the conditions for their application have been slow and fraught with political and financial challenges, especially in the EU and its member states. This prolonged decision-making weakens Ukraine's ability to defend itself effectively and disrupts its counteroffensive potential.

Moreover, Russia and other authoritarian regimes have weaponized this ambiguity to pollute the global information space with disinformation and propaganda. Through targeted campaigns, these regimes have sown divisions within NATO and EU societies, fracturing public opinion on supporting Ukraine. These divisions in public discourse translate into political disagreements, which delay critical support packages and erode Ukraine's defensive capabilities over time. Beyond the West, this disinformation has also diminished support for Ukraine on the global stage, particularly in regions such as South Asia and Africa, which do not necessarily align with the Western world. In these regions, Russia's narrative often portrays the conflict as a proxy war driven by Western interests, further undermining Ukraine's position and complicating efforts to build a broader coalition of support. Because of the ambiguity, Western support to Ukraine was never on time and never enough to repel Russian aggression and lay the foundation for lasting peace.

## Connecting Ukraine's Uncertainty to Georgia's Crisis

The deficiencies of Western strategic ambiguity in Ukraine resonate powerfully in Georgia. While Russia faces significant setbacks and strategic failures post-2022, it still managed to exploit the protracted war, destruction, and human suffering in Ukraine to tighten its grip on Georgia. This underscores the interconnected nature of Western indecision and Russia's ability to adapt and exploit that vulnerability. Russian disinformation narratives, actively [supported](#) by the Georgian Dream (GD) regime on a local level, have capitalized on Georgian society's terrifying memories of the Russian invasion in 2008. These narratives leverage the trauma of past conflict, directly threatening another military confrontation similar to the one unfolding in Ukraine should Georgia align itself with Western interests and values. This tactic not only sows fear and hesitation within Georgian society but also undermines the country's pro-Western aspirations, effectively serving Russia's strategic objective of isolating Georgia from the West without overt military action.

***The situation in Georgia demonstrates the broader consequences of Western indecision. The West's inability to confront Russian aggression with clear and unified strategies, as seen in Ukraine, has left Georgia vulnerable to authoritarian consolidation and Moscow's influence.***

The situation in Georgia demonstrates the broader consequences of Western indecision. The West's inability to confront Russian aggression with clear and unified strategies, as seen in Ukraine, has left Georgia vulnerable to authoritarian consolidation and Moscow's influence. Georgia's democratic backsliding and [increasing](#) authoritarianism under

the Georgian Dream's regime exemplifies a broader struggle between Western and Russian influences. Strengthening authoritarian rule in Georgia is not merely a domestic issue but a regional challenge with profound implications for Black Sea security and broader Western strategic interests. The West's failure to articulate a clear strategy for Ukraine has enabled Russia to double down on its hybrid warfare tactics in Georgia, further destabilizing the region.

A striking example of Western indecisiveness is its response to the severe crisis following Georgia's highly [contested](#) elections. Despite thousands of documented [cases](#) of election manipulation collected by domestic and international observers, the West failed to unambiguously declare the elections neither free nor fair or call for a rerun. Nearly all complaints from watchdog organizations were baselessly dismissed by Georgia's courts, further proving the extent of the rigging. Yet, Western countries and institutions maintained an ambiguous stance, often citing procedural justifications.

Another glaring example of Western hesitation is the process of sanctioning those responsible for election rigging and human rights violations in Georgia. Georgia's pro-democracy political spectrum and civil society repeatedly called for a clear Western response to the rapid democratic rollback, but their pleas have largely been met with symbolic measures. Nearly a month after the contested elections, the EU and a few member states implemented sanctions that are largely symbolic, failing to deliver the strong response demanded by the gravity of the crisis. While the UK and the US eventually sanctioned five and two officials, respectively, these actions targeted only a small number of individuals responsible for violence against protesters, leaving the broader system of authoritarian consolidation untouched. Concrete, actionable steps that could deter further democratic erosion and violence remain absent.

The lack of coordination and decisive political resolve is most evident in the Western sanctioning process. Hungary and Slovakia vetoed the consensus on individual sanctions against the Georgian Dream regime representatives during the EU Foreign Affairs Council meetings, effectively blocking a unified European response. This obstruction underscores the challenges of achieving collective action within the EU when member states prioritize their domestic political agendas or maintain ties with authoritarian actors. In contrast, only the three Baltic states—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—[demonstrated](#) a unified stance by putting forward a coordinated list of targeted sanctions. This effort could serve as a guiding example for other EU member states, showcasing the importance of swift and aligned actions in addressing democratic backsliding.

***To ensure real impact, sanctions must be expanded to target Ivanishvili's inner circle and sprawling business empire, which underpins his political and financial power.***

The recent [decision](#) by the United States to sanction Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party, marks a significant step in addressing his role in enabling Russian influence and undermining Georgia's democratic development. Sanctioned under a package targeting individuals and entities aiding Russia's war effort, this move underscores the growing recognition of Ivanishvili's outsized influence on Georgian politics and his regime's alignment with Kremlin interests. While this action is a crucial signal, it remains only a first step. To ensure real impact, sanctions must be expanded to target Ivanishvili's inner circle and sprawling business empire, which underpins his political and financial power. Escalating sanctions to include key allies, financial institutions, and offshore assets linked to Ivanishvili could amplify the pressure, disrupting the eco-

nomical foundations of his influence and sending a stronger message about the consequences of undermining democratic principles and facilitating Russian aggression. Without this escalation, the sanctions risk being largely symbolic, falling short of the transformative effect needed to curb his grip on Georgia's political landscape.

The broader picture remains fragmented. While the sanctions imposed by the US and the UK are significant, they lack synchronization with the logic applied by the Baltic states and fail to form part of a cohesive Western strategy. This piecemeal approach undermines the potential effectiveness of sanctions as a deterrent and signals a troubling lack of urgency in addressing the Georgian Dream regime's authoritarian practices. Without a unified and robust Western response, the Georgian government is emboldened to continue its democratic rollback, further aligning itself with Russia's geopolitical interests.

Pro-democracy Georgians—civil society leaders, opposition parties, and citizens protesting in the streets for over a month—have been imploring Western partners for decisive action, warning that the country is teetering into a deeper crisis by the day. They argue that the processes underway are nearing a point of no return, requiring urgent and substantial Western intervention to preserve democracy and stability. Yet, the West's ambiguous and fragmented response has emboldened authoritarian actors within Georgia and strengthened Russia's leverage in the region, further destabilizing an already fragile Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

***Russia's strategic failures have created a unique opportunity for the West to reassert influence in the region, yet this requires decisive policies that go beyond symbolic gestures.***

Russia's strategic failures have created a unique opportunity for the West to reassert influence in the region, yet this requires decisive policies that go beyond symbolic gestures. Georgia's geopolitical significance as a critical hub for East-West connectivity and a counterweight to Russian aggression cannot be overstated. However, the ongoing escalation of authoritarian rule in Georgia provides Russia and its allies with opportunities to bypass sanctions, launder money, and pursue aggressive agendas, undermining Western influence in the region.

## The Cost of Strategic Ambiguity

***Thousands of Georgians are risking their lives and their futures to defend democracy and the country's European aspirations. Yet, the EU and other Western powers remain hesitant, offering little more than statements of concern.***

As Russia wages an all-out war of attrition in Ukraine and conducts an unprecedented hybrid assault on Georgia, the Western policy of strategic ambiguity is proving devastating not only for these countries but also for the West's broader strategic interests in the Black Sea region and beyond. Thousands of Georgians are risking their lives and their futures to defend democracy and the country's European aspirations. Yet, the EU and other Western powers remain hesitant, offering little more than statements of concern. This inaction sends a dangerous signal: the West is unwilling or unable to act decisively when democratic values and regional stability are under direct assault.

Sanctions, for example, must be used as a preventive tool rather than a post-factum punishment. Imposing sanctions after irreparable damage has been done is ineffective. This mistake was made in the case of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus,

and there is a risk of it being repeated in Georgia. Sanctions targeting key figures such as Bidzina Ivanishvili should be implemented now while they can still compel free and fair elections and prevent the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Waiting until Georgia crosses the point of no return will render sanctions meaningless and further erode the West's credibility in supporting democracy and stability.

The situation in Ukraine similarly underscores the dangers of strategic ambiguity. Proposals to revert to a pre-2022 pattern, such as pressuring Ukraine into a ceasefire and negotiating with Russia without clear terms for victory, would only reinforce Russia's belief that aggression pays off. Allowing the conflict to devolve into a war of attrition risks returning to a dynamic where Moscow regains the upper hand. Such an approach would not only devastate Ukraine's future but also embolden Russia and its allies to continue destabilizing wider European security.

A proactive strategy should immediately replace the strategic ambiguity hindering the West's response in Ukraine and Georgia. The crises in these two countries are not isolated; they are deeply interconnected. The West must recognize this link and confront Russian aggression with a unified and decisive strategy in both countries. Failing to act decisively in Georgia would further enable Russian expansionism and undermine the West's long-term security interests in Ukraine, the Black Sea region, and beyond.

***If the West waits for irreversible damage to occur, it risks losing its credibility and the geopolitical balance that sustains Euro-Atlantic security.***

Preventive action is not just an option; it is a vital necessity. Imposing sanctions on key decision makers and primarily on Bidzina Ivanishvili, pre-

emptively supporting democratic movements with tangible resources, and clearly communicating the West's commitment to countering Russian aggression is critical. If the West waits for irreversible damage to occur, it risks losing its credibility and

the geopolitical balance that sustains Euro-Atlantic security. The time to act decisively is now—before strategic ambiguity allows the situation in Georgia, Ukraine, and the wider Black Sea region to spiral further out of control ■

# Proxies of Evil

The history of humankind is intimately familiar with the notion of proxy wars fought over centuries. The evolution of warfare has brought changes in strategies, tactics, hardware, and more, but the essence of these wars remains the same: they are fought through “proxy actors” or “proxy regimes” that pledge their loyalty to an external power for various motivations, including ideology, power, money, or personal interests. The advent of so-called “hybrid warfare” has further expanded the concept of proxy wars. Today, the battlefield is not limited to kinetic confrontation but extends to cyberspace (including social media), economic measures (such as undermining sanctions regimes), and the destabilization of institutions despised by external actors.

***When a proxy regime controls a state, that state inevitably becomes a client state.***

An observant eye can notice similarities between external actors and their proxies in ideological

dogmas, power-grabbing methods, rhetoric, and even legislative adaptations. When a proxy regime controls a state, that state inevitably becomes a client state.

A brief look at developments in the Middle East vividly demonstrates how such proxies operate. Examples include Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ansar Allah (also known as the Houthis movement) in Yemen, and the (now dethroned) Assad regime in Syria, which has become a client state of Iran and Russia.

## Historic References

As the Industrial Revolution advanced and challenged outdated feudal systems, foreign affairs, and international relations grew increasingly complex. This fundamental shift also impacted proxy warfare. Large states began forming formal alliances based on shared interests, often referred to as “axes.” Smaller countries and non-state actors gravitated toward these axes, eventually becoming instrumental in wars waged by the core powers.



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One such alliance during World War II was the Rome–Berlin–Tokyo Axis. History books state that “the Rome–Berlin–Tokyo Axis became a military alliance in 1939 under the so-called ‘Pact of Steel’ with the Tripartite Pact of 1940 formally integrating the military aims of Germany, Italy, and Japan. These pacts formed the foundation of the Axis alliance.” The term “Axis” was coined by Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini in September 1923 when he wrote that “the axis of European history passes through Berlin.”

Soon after forming the Axis, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Croatia began orbiting around it, with some becoming formal members. Other states followed for diverse reasons, participating in Axis politics to varying degrees (e.g., Denmark, Finland, Spain). Special emphasis was placed on so-called “puppet states”—nominally independent governments formed out of local sympathizers but under varying degrees of control by Germany, Italy, or Japan. Examples included Albania, Serbia, Thailand, Burma, and Manchuria. Another category was “client states,” such as Greece (Hellenic State), Cambodia, Azad Hind, Inner Mongolia (Mengjiang), Laos, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

The Allied victory and the collapse of Axis led to a significant reshuffling of the world order. The victors determined the fates of those who served as Axis proxies. Some were fortunate enough to join the Western orbit, while others fell into the Soviet sphere of influence, exchanging one oppressive regime for another. It took decades for many Central and Eastern European states to regain real independence, address security concerns, and ensure economic prosperity.

The Soviet Union, one of the victors of World War II, quickly adopted the perks of proxy warfare, multiplying such regimes in its immediate vicinity (e.g., the Warsaw Pact) and globally through economic, military, and political support for anti-Western regimes and ideological allies, including non-state

actors like the PLO, Sendero Luminoso, Khmer Rouge, and others. The Cold War era was marked by numerous proxy wars: Korea, Vietnam, Angola, Congo, and Chile, to name just a few. The Soviet Union’s involvement ranged from limited covert aid to full-scale invasions. The suffering caused by Soviet-backed regimes and groups became synonymous with evil, prompting US President Ronald Reagan to label the USSR the “Evil Empire.”

The collapse of the Soviet Union reduced the number of proxy wars, although not the number of conflicts, which were now often waged for domestic or ideological reasons rather than aligned with a particular ideological axis. This collapse allowed many former proxies to reinvent themselves as modern, prosperous nations aligned with alliances of their choice.

In January 2002, US President George W. Bush [suggested](#) the emergence of a new axis—the “Axis of Evil,” comprising Iran, Iraq (under Saddam Hussein), and North Korea. These states were labeled as “sponsors of terrorism” intent on acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Later the following year, then Undersecretary of State John Bolton [expanded](#) the list to include other “rogue states:” Cuba, Libya, and Syria. This label essentially applied to all actors seeking to undermine the post-Cold War world order, displaying overt anti-Western sentiment through malicious policies and actions.

From this axis, Iraq, Libya, and recently Syria have seen regime changes. However, the collapse of these regimes often resulted in the sectarian fragmentation of their states, creating new breeding grounds for proxies promoted by external powers.

## New Axis and Their Proxies

Although the US emerged as the sole global superpower after the Cold War, its prolonged engagement in the war on terror led to fatigue and a noticeable shift in strategy. The US transitioned from

a hard-power approach to one prioritizing soft power. However, this shift did not create the anticipated stability but instead left multiple power vacuums, quickly filled by revisionist forces. These forces interpreted the US's relaxed posture as a sign of Western weakness—capable of loud statements but devoid of meaningful actions or consequential policies.

***Russia returned to the concept of “spheres of influence,” employing traditional proxy war methodologies to multiply its proxies in various forms and regions.***

Revisionist powers, such as Russia and Iran, began exploiting these vacuums, reinvigorating proxy warfare. Russia returned to the concept of “spheres of influence,” employing traditional proxy war methodologies to multiply its proxies in various forms and regions.

Iran, on the other hand, openly established its “Axis of Resistance,” relying on proxies such as Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Islamic Resistance and Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, the Assad regime in Syria, and Houthis in Yemen. These proxies received financial support, weapons, military advisers, and extensive political and media backing.

Although some in the West argue the emergence of a new axis comprising Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China, the latter two states have not yet demonstrated meaningful reliance on classical proxies. However, One might argue that North Korea is effectively a client state of China.

## **The Rise and Fall of Proxies**

The year 2025 begins with noticeable turbulence in international affairs, and the West finds itself in

a precarious position. The return of Donald Trump and his polarizing pre- and post-electoral statements further fuel uncertainty. Governments in Germany, France, Austria, and Canada face political challenges that will likely lead to changes in leadership.

However, the alleged “stability” of anti-Western regimes is even more fragile, and the same applies to their proxies.

In the past year, the world witnessed the dramatic decline and defeat of Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups in Gaza. Hezbollah in Lebanon faces a similar fate, and the surprising fall of Assad's regime in Syria will have long-lasting regional consequences. The Houthis are under relentless attack and weakening. Iranian influence is shrinking in the region, and its long-established Axis of Resistance appears on the brink of collapse if it has not already dissolved. Domestically, Iran itself faces unprecedented political and economic hardships unseen in decades.

Russian proxies are similarly struggling. Russia's attempts to undermine the West through election interference have failed, and its efforts in Romania and Moldova have backfired. Even more significantly, losing influence in Syria—and potentially its only military base on the Mediterranean—represents a critical blow to Russia's power projection in the Middle East and Africa.

Russia's use of energy as a tool for proxy wars is also backfiring. Regimes dependent on Russian gas supplies face severe vulnerabilities due to interrupted deliveries via Ukraine. Even staunch proxies like Abkhazia in Georgia and Transnistria in Moldova are grappling with energy shortages.

The downfall of “orphaned” proxies often has dire consequences for the populations they once controlled. While top leadership might find refuge or

protection, the rank-and-file often faces imprisonment, death, or social ostracism.

Against this backdrop, the behavior of Georgia's current regime raises not only eyebrows but serious questions.

## Is the Georgian Regime a Proxy of Russia?

When Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream (GD) party came to power, he publicly declared that Georgia should refrain from active foreign policy and avoid aligning too closely with any major power bloc. While European and Euro-Atlantic integration was still nominally proclaimed as a national aspiration, practical steps in that direction slowed significantly or were primarily driven by inertia. The West dismissed early crackdowns on political opposition and attacks on civil society as minor transgressions.

This dynamic changed dramatically following Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. The Georgian Dream government and its leadership openly sided with Russia, criticizing both Ukrainian and Western governments. Georgian government rhetoric began mirroring Russian narratives, soon accompanied by Russian-style actions: amending laws to target civil society and political opposition, expelling opposition-minded Russian activists (including journalists) while welcoming Russian businesses and capital of questionable origin, undermining Western sanctions against Russia, and rigging elections.

Recently, the GD government cracked down on protests in a manner reminiscent of Russia's authoritarian playbook. These actions occurred alongside a persistent demonization of the West, labeling it the "war party" with party-controlled media and troll factories amplifying these narratives across social media.

**Comparing Georgia's current regime with those of other Russian proxy regimes reveals stark similarities in governance, rhetoric, and tactics.**

Comparing Georgia's current regime with those of other Russian proxy regimes reveals stark similarities in governance, rhetoric, and tactics. Thus, there is little doubt that Georgia's current regime functions as a proxy for Russia.

The motivations for this alignment remain speculative. On the surface, individuals like Bidzina Ivanishvili are better positioned to secure their interests by cooperating with the West. However, as cases like Viktor Yanukovich's regime in Ukraine illustrate, an intrinsic mistrust of the West often drives such figures into Russia's sphere of influence. The fate of Yanukovich—and recently, Bashar al-Assad—serves as a cautionary tale for Georgia's leadership.

## How Georgia Can Avoid the Fate of a "Disposable Proxy"

Georgia stands at a critical crossroads, and its leadership decisions will determine its future. The nation faces two starkly different paths: It can remain a proxy of Russia and become a client state of an increasingly isolated, corrupt, and declining regime. Alternatively, it can accelerate its European and Euro-Atlantic integration to secure its place within the community of democratic, rule-based, and prosperous nations.

If the Georgian Dream government remains in power, the first path is inevitable, making regime change imperative for the second option to be viable. Achieving this change is easier said than done, but the current domestic and international climate provides reasons for cautious optimism.

So far, the regime has failed to suppress public outcry over fraudulent elections and the suspension of the European integration path. These protests bear a striking resemblance to Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity. As in Ukraine, Georgia's demonstrators are driven by grassroots movements rather than political leadership. The crowdsourced resistance presents an unprecedented challenge for the ruling regime, whose response has been a patchwork of ad hoc measures that have only deepened the political crisis.

***While the solution—new elections—is clear and widely articulated, the regime appears unwilling to risk another fraudulent “victory.” Instead, it seems to be pinning its hopes on protesters’ fatigue.***

While the solution—new elections—is clear and widely articulated, the regime appears unwilling to risk another fraudulent “victory.” Instead, it seems to be pinning its hopes on protesters’ fatigue. However, signs of such fatigue are not yet apparent.

Adding to the uncertainty, the regime has suggested that political changes in the West—notably Donald Trump’s inauguration—will shift Western attitudes toward Georgia’s leadership. For seasoned foreign affairs analysts, such hopes are baseless fantasies or deliberate misinformation.

## The Role of the West

The West must remain consistent in both rhetoric and action.

It must recognize the Georgian regime as a Russian proxy, which entails denying legitimacy to the current government at all levels, bilateral and international.

***Western governments should invite leaders of major opposition parties and Georgian civil society representatives for high-level meetings.***

The West must also support the opposition and civil society. Western governments should invite leaders of major opposition parties and Georgian civil society representatives for high-level meetings. Such gestures would empower pro-Western forces and demonstrate clear support for the Georgian people’s aspirations.

The West must also apply more sanctions and seek the Georgian Dream’s accountability. Building on the bipartisan “Megobari Act,” [reintroduced](#) to Congress on January 3 by U.S. Helsinki Commission Chairman Congressman Joe Wilson (R-SC), Ranking Member Congressman Steve Cohen (D-TN), Congressman Richard Hudson (R-NC) and Congressman Marc Veasey (D-TX). Based on the Act, further economic sanctions and travel bans should be extended to members of immediate families and the business enterprises of already sanctioned individuals. Additional individuals should be included in the list, and, importantly, such lists should be made (or leaked to the) public. It is crucial to focus on enforcing the sanctions by showcasing several cases of the effectiveness of such sanctions. The most relevant would be to focus on restricting banking services and freezing assets even if they are not located under US jurisdiction (secondary sanctions).

Furthermore, Georgian issues must return to the agenda of the allies, including Türkiye and the Arab states. The new Syrian leadership should be urged and encouraged to revoke Asad’s regime’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

The West must also strengthen ties with Georgia’s legitimate representatives. The US and its allies

should bolster support for President Salome Zourabichvili, the last legitimate representative of the Georgian government.

***Professionals in the relevant US agencies are well-versed in such situations and have multiple toolboxes. What they will need is a political push.***

This is just a short list of crucial actions to be taken in the earliest days of the new US administration, but it is by no means all-encompassing or exhausting. Professionals in the relevant US agencies are well-versed in such situations and have multiple toolboxes. What they will need is a political push.

These actions would invigorate Georgia's pro-Western forces and accelerate the erosion of the current regime's power, ultimately paving the way for democratic reforms.

Shrinking the number of Russian proxies will be instrumental in pushing Russia towards ending the war in Ukraine and achieving long-lasting peace in the region under the US-European leadership. The alternative will not only be the Georgian Dream being transformed into the Georgian Nightmare but also a situation of prolonged horror with Russian tricks and threats of its new proxies ■

# Names, not Passports!

## The EU Should Use Its Visa-Free Carrot More Wisely

**T**he European Union positions itself as a global actor committed to preventing and resolving conflicts, supporting resilient democracies, championing human rights, promoting sustainable development, and upholding a cooperative, rules-based global order. The unfolding crisis in Georgia presents yet another litmus test for the EU to demonstrate its commitment to these principles. Losing Georgia and its people to Russian oligarchic influence and authoritarianism is a luxury the EU cannot afford.

***The unfolding crisis in Georgia presents yet another litmus test for the EU to demonstrate its commitment to these principles.***

On November 28, 2024, Georgian Dream's (GD)

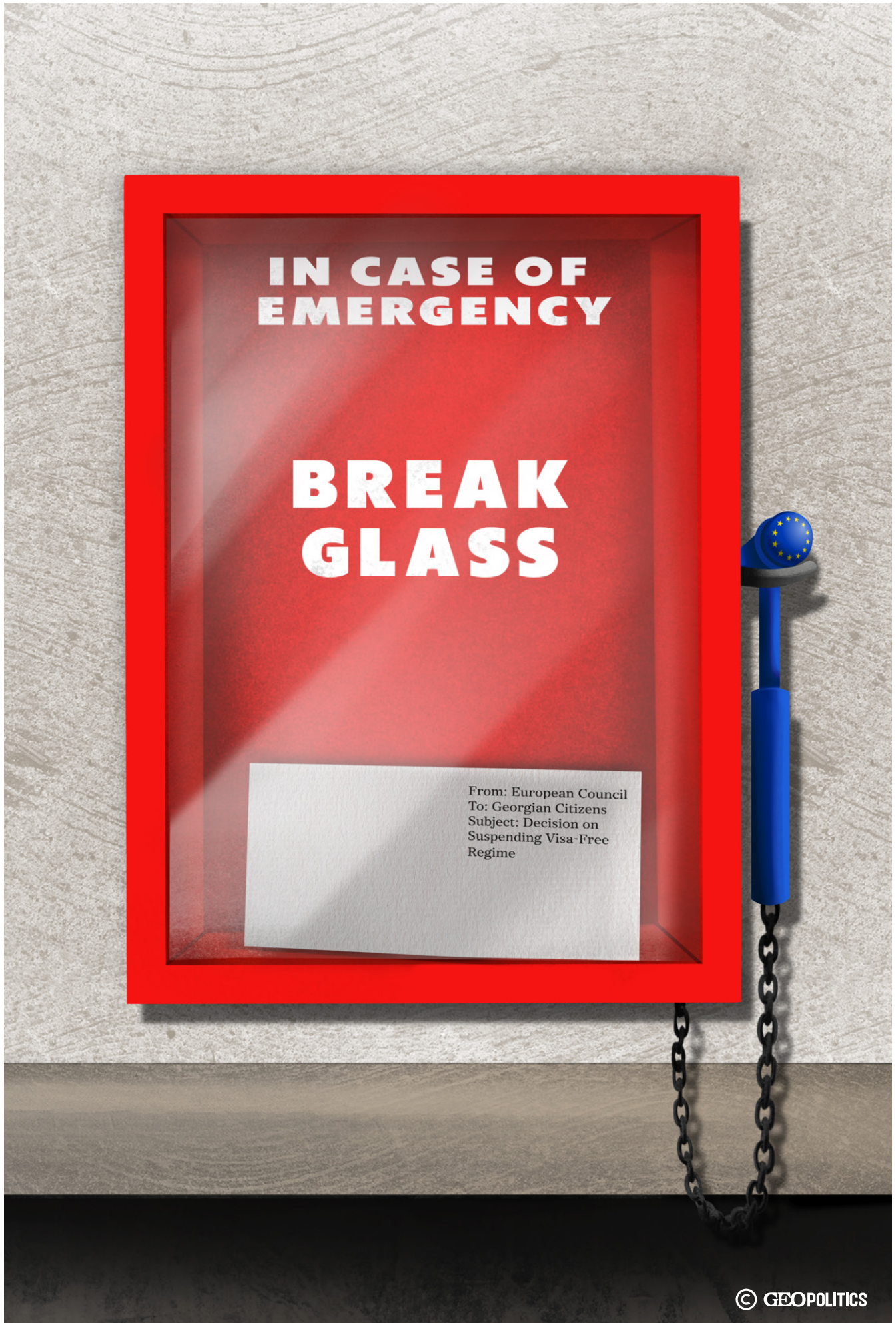
Prime Minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, delivered a blow to both Georgian citizens and the EU by announcing the government's decision to abandon efforts toward EU accession negotiations. This declaration, orchestrated under the influence of Russian oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, marked a formal rejection of the reforms tied to the EU accession process—a process seen as a Damocles' Sword to the Georgian Dream's grip on power.

This move ignited massive, ongoing protests across Georgia, met with brutal repression by the Georgian Dream government. State security forces, controlled by GD loyalists, resorted to violence, arrests, and intimidation to quash dissent, leaving hundreds of Georgians beaten, detained, and threatened. The GD-stacked courts upheld the criminal charges against over thirty persons and sentenced several hundred to short-term and administrative detentions.



**VANO CHKHIKVADZE**  
Contributor

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Draconic new laws were passed within a week in December to cripple the protests, suppress dissent and tighten control over civic life, marking a stark departure from democratic norms. Changes to the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations banned items like pyrotechnics, lasers, and face coverings at protests, while amendments to the Administrative Offenses Code sharply increased fines for protest activities and expanded police powers for detention and searches without court orders. The Police Law enabled non-competitive recruitment, raising concerns about politically motivated hires, and the Law on Civil Service politicized public administration, allowing arbitrary dismissals and making civil servants more vulnerable to political pressure. Together, these measures undermined freedoms, weakened civil society, and signaled Georgia's continued regression from its European aspirations.

By turning its back on the EU path, the Georgian Dream not only betrayed the 80% of Georgians who support European integration but also dared the EU to act. Once again, the EU's patience and resolve were tested. However, its response—measured and cautious—fell short of the robust action demanded by the gravity of the crisis.

Such violations of democratic norms and human rights merit EU sanctions, however, serious human rights-related sanctions require consensus. However, the EU's common stand on Georgia is held hostage by spoilers like Hungary and Slovakia. In response to this challenge, the EU sought a face-saving solution. With no consensus in sight over serious financial or human rights-related sanctions, the Union faced two options: either activate the visa suspension mechanism (which requires only a simple majority) to target diplomatic passport holders from Georgia or take a broader political step by suspending visa-free travel for all Georgian citizens, a privilege enjoyed since 2017. Ultimately, the EU chose not to undermine ordinary Georgian citizens defending the European

future and [opted](#) for the first route. In December, the EU halted visa-free travel for Georgian diplomatic passport holders and called on the European Commission to present a proposal on this matter. This decision sent a clear signal: while the EU door narrowed for Georgian officials, it remained open for citizens.

## Visa-Free In Danger?

Since 2017, Georgian citizens with ordinary passports have enjoyed visa-free travel to EU and Schengen zone countries, granted after meeting the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) requirements. The European Commission is tasked with monitoring compliance with these requirements. Since 2018, the EU has had the authority to [activate](#) a visa-free travel suspension mechanism if the beneficiary country fails to meet specific criteria, including:

- A significant increase (over 50%) in the number of irregular arrivals from visa-free countries, including those overstaying their visas or being refused entry at the border;
- A substantial rise (over 50%) in asylum applications from countries with low recognition rates (around 3-4%);
- A decline in cooperation on readmission;
- An elevated security risk to EU Member States;
- Failure to meet specific benchmarks required for visa liberalization.

The European Union is currently [revising](#) the visa suspension mechanism, introducing updates to the criteria for triggering it in cases of significant and sudden deterioration in relations with a third country, particularly concerning human rights and fundamental freedoms. The new framework proposes raising the asylum recognition rate threshold to 20% (instead of the previously suggested 4%) to classify it as low. Additionally, the duration of temporary visa exemption suspensions will be extended

	2022	2023
Asylum Applications	26,555	24,375
Irregular Stays	22,015	24,595
Refusal to Entry	4,015	3,680

Source: 7<sup>th</sup> report under the visa suspension mechanism; 6.12.2024

from 9 to 12 months, with the possibility of further extension to 24 months (up from 18 months under the current system). The reference period for identifying circumstances leading to a suspension has also been expanded to cover at least two months.

In December 2024, the European Commission [published](#) its seventh report under the visa suspension mechanism as part of its ongoing monitoring of the visa liberalization process. From a technical perspective, the report highlights some improvements in Georgia's performance regarding key criteria, including fewer persons refused entry at the border, a reduced number of asylum seekers, improved cooperation on readmission, and a lower perceived security risk to EU Member States compared to the previous year. The number of asylum seekers decreased slightly, from 26,555 in 2022 to 24,375 in 2023, with a recognition rate of 7%. Refusals of entry also declined, from 4,015 in 2022 to 3,680 in 2023. However, the number of Georgian citizens irregularly staying in the EU rose from 22,015 in 2022 to 24,595 in 2023. The Commission report also noted that the Georgian authorities continued cooperating with the EU on readmission (see the table above).

However, in 2024, Georgia's relationship with the European Union has deteriorated significantly, alongside notable backsliding on the requirements of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP). This decline has been particularly evident in the areas of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Despite widespread public protests and aspirations for closer ties with the EU, the ruling Georgian Dream

party passed Russian-style laws on "transparency of foreign influence" and "family values and protection of minors," undermining the country's democratic credentials. These moves posed a direct challenge to the EU, prompting the Union to consider its response. European Commission spokesperson Peter Stano underscored this shift, [stating](#) that "all options are on the table" if Georgian Dream continues its authoritarian trajectory, "including the potential temporary suspension of the visa liberalization scheme." The cohort of new anti-democratic December laws further added fuel to Georgia's non-European path.

For years, Georgia met the criteria for suspending visa-free travel, but the EU and its member states chose to overlook these issues as a gesture of goodwill. However, following Georgian Dream's decision to backtrack on EU accession, this goodwill no longer holds. Yet, suspending visa-free travel remains a matter of consensus, creating a dilemma. On the one hand, the suspension is now fully justified based on the established rules and criteria, especially as the Georgian government shows little interest in maintaining a strategic partnership with the EU. On the other hand, removing visa-free travel does not require unanimous approval. However, the main consequence would fall not on the government but on ordinary Georgian citizens.

It was because of these considerations that the EU opted for a targeted suspension of the visa-free regime for Georgian officials holding diplomatic passports and refrained from "punishing" ordinary Georgians.

Diplomatic passport holders in Georgia have long enjoyed privileges denied to ordinary citizens. Since 2011, an [agreement](#) between the European Union and Georgia on visa facilitation allowed holders of diplomatic passports to travel to EU Member States without a visa for up to 90 days within a 180-day period. Meanwhile, ordinary citizens were left to contend with the so-called “Schengen wallpaper,” enduring time-consuming and often humiliating visa application processes.

The Foreign Affairs Council's decision to suspend the visa-free regime for diplomatic passport holders reversed this dynamic, putting ordinary citizens in a more favorable position than the elites and those closely tied to the Georgian Dream government. This move carried significant political weight. It signaled that the EU acknowledges and supports the Georgian people's struggle for democracy and European integration. At the same time, it undercut Georgian Dream's potential narrative that the EU's actions are punitive towards the public, a message often exploited for propaganda.

***Closing the EU door to ordinary citizens while leaving it open for government-affiliated elites would have been seen as unjust and counterproductive.***

Moreover, maintaining visa-free travel for ordinary citizens is practical and humane. It ensures that activists and others facing regime pressure can temporarily leave the country without the additional burden of navigating the visa application process. Closing the EU door to ordinary citizens while leaving it open for government-affiliated elites would have been seen as unjust and counterproductive.

## Implementation Matters

Now, the EU faces a critical challenge. It needs to prove whether the decision on suspending visa-free for diplomatic passport-holders is a symbolic,

face-saving gesture, as some Georgian Dream officials [claim](#), or a meaningful act that can be enforced to the detriment of the political interests of the ruling party and its cronies.

***A key issue is Georgian officials' dual-passport privilege. Many diplomatic passport holders also possess ordinary passports, which they can use to travel visa-free to EU and Schengen Zone countries.***

A key issue is Georgian officials' dual-passport privilege. Many diplomatic passport holders also possess ordinary passports, which they can use to travel visa-free to EU and Schengen Zone countries. Allowing this loophole to persist would undermine the EU's credibility and signal a lack of resolve. To demonstrate seriousness, the EU must ensure its measures leave no room for Georgian officials to sidestep the restrictions.

As it stands, the European Commission's [approach](#) focuses on targeting diplomatic and service passports as categories rather than identifying the specific individuals responsible for Georgia's democratic backsliding. Decree #176, [issued](#) on April 20, 2015, regulates the issuance of diplomatic and service passports in Georgia. It lists the positions entitled to such passports while granting discretion to the Ministries of Defense and Internal Affairs, as well as the State Security Service, to allocate up to 145 diplomatic passports for additional personnel. In total, several hundred individuals qualify for diplomatic passports under this system.

The EU's decision to suspend visa-free travel for these passport holders while maintaining it for ordinary Georgian citizens is a step in the right direction. It sends a strong message: Georgian officials are no longer welcome in the EU, and their privileges are being stripped away. However, this should not be seen as the final step. Georgian Dream of-

officials have openly vowed to continue visiting EU Member States, exploiting the remaining loopholes.

***To close these gaps and assert itself as a global actor committed to the rules-based international order, the EU should take further action.***

To close these gaps and assert itself as a global actor committed to the rules-based international order, the EU should take further action. This includes gathering personal data on diplomatic passport holders through its delegation, Member State embassies, and local partners, and compiling a list of individuals to restrict from entering the EU and

Schengen Zone—even with ordinary passports. By adding these individuals to the Schengen Information System (SIS)—which contains biometric data such as photographs, fingerprints, and palm prints—the EU could ensure that those undermining Georgia’s democracy are effectively barred from entering.

Without such measures, Georgian Dream officials will continue to mock the EU’s actions as “toothless,” exploiting visa-free travel while disregarding the consequences of their anti-democratic actions. To uphold its credibility and values, the EU must go beyond symbolism and make its decisions impactful and enforceable ■

# Georgia's Near-Frozen Trade Relations with the EU

**E**U-Georgia relations have reached a historic low just a little over a year after Georgia was granted EU candidate status in December 2023. The EU and its member states have refused to recognize the results of the 2024 parliamentary elections, suspending politically significant EU budgetary and bilateral assistance programs. Additionally, no high-level meetings or cooperation format discussions are currently planned. These measures are a direct response to the Georgian Dream (GD) leadership's decision to halt Georgia's EU integration efforts until 2028, the end of their current term.

Amid this unprecedented political tension, EU-Georgia trade and economic relations, governed by the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), are also showing signs of decline. Before analyzing the reasons for this decline, two factors need to be stressed.

First, like any trade agreement, the DCFTA is

merely one tool—albeit an important one—for fostering trade growth and diversification. It is not a panacea or a transformative solution for economic development. Its effectiveness is inherently limited if not complemented by a supportive economic environment, a favorable business climate, and robust trade policy measures.

Second, the economic benefits of the DCFTA were always expected to materialize in the medium to long term. Beyond tariff liberalization, the agreement required substantial legal alignment of Georgian trade and economic legislation with EU standards. This legal approximation aimed to lay the groundwork for the sustainable integration of Georgia's economy into the EU, fostering increased exports and trade turnover over time. However, these changes came with significant regulatory adjustment costs as they necessitated the establishment of new institutions and expanded functions for the state to oversee and regulate market processes effectively.



**TAMARA KOVZIRIDZE**  
Guest Contributor

Tamara Kovziridze has extensive experience in governance, consulting and academic activities. In 2004-2012 she held various senior positions in the Government of Georgia, among others as Deputy Minister of Economy and as Chief Adviser to the Prime Minister. Tamara participated in planning and implementation of key regulatory and trade reforms and led preparation and negotiation process on the EU-Georgia DCFTA. As partner and senior director at a consulting firm Reformatics, since 2012 Tamara has advised more than a dozen governments in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East on regulatory, institutional and economic reforms. Tamara Kovziridze holds a Master's degree in political science and economics from the University of Heidelberg, Germany and a Ph.D. from the Free University of Brussels, Belgium.



**Ten years have passed since the entry into force of the EU-Georgia DCFTA. By now, the legal approximation process is almost over, but Georgia's trade with the EU has grown only at a marginal rate.**

Ten years have passed since the entry into force of the EU-Georgia DCFTA. By now, the legal approximation process is almost over, but Georgia's trade with the EU has grown only at a marginal rate. In 2014-2023, Georgia's exports to the EU grew just by 1% annually, and the EU-Georgia trade turnover grew by a mere 4% on average during the same period. This result is far worse than expected and, paradoxically, dramatically worse than Georgia's trade performance with the EU before trade liberalization through the DCFTA.

## DCFTA Was Built on Solid Foundation

In 2005, Georgia proposed the idea of a free trade agreement with the EU, a move primarily driven by the Russian embargo imposed on all Georgian agricultural exports in 2006. In this context, expanding exports to the EU became a crucial strategy for trade diversification while also serving the political objective of deepening ties with the Union, whose membership was something Georgia aspired to. Initially, the EU was hesitant to engage in substantive discussions with Tbilisi. However, following extensive consultations, negotiations began in 2011, and the agreement eventually came into force in 2014.

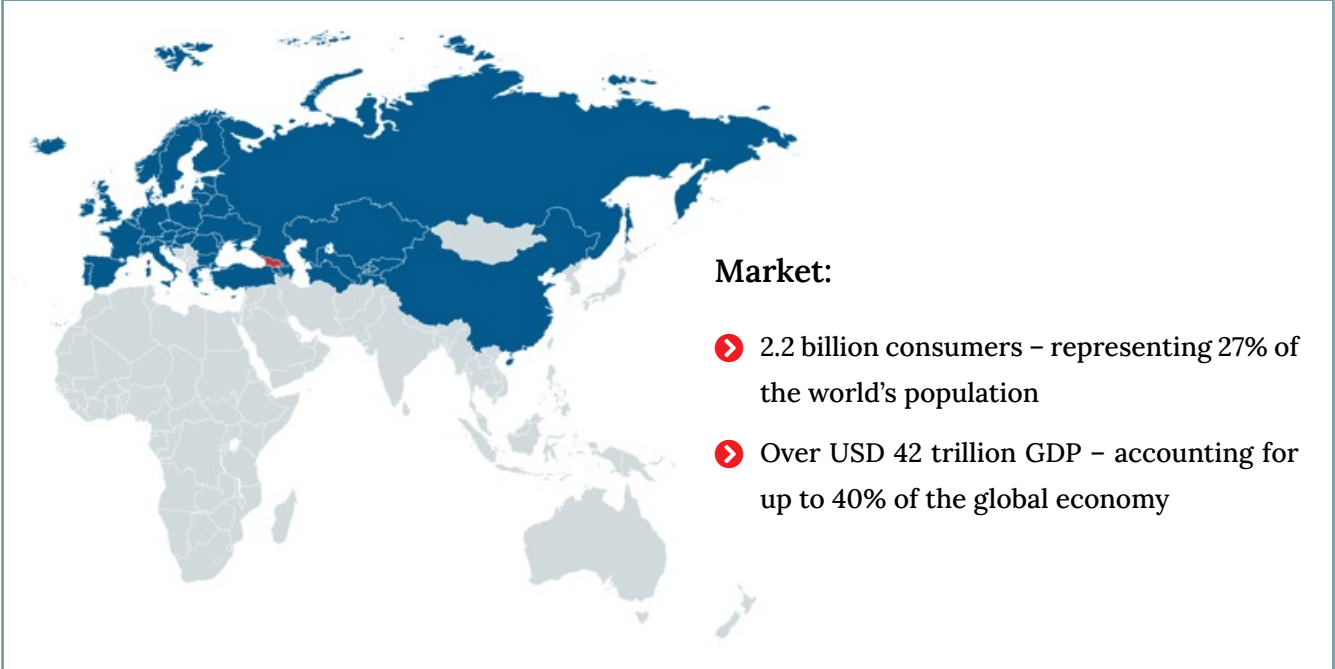
For the EU the DCFTA was designed to encourage Georgia to align its trade and economic regulations with EU standards. While this alignment came with substantial conditionalities, it also served as a tool of soft power, shaping Georgia's economic policies and fostering closer integration.

When DCFTA negotiations began in 2011, EU-Georgia trade and Georgia's exports to the EU were at their peak, increasing by 29% that year. Georgia's tariff system was highly competitive, with zero tariffs on nearly 85% of goods. Its trade and customs regulations and business environment were internationally recognized as favorable. According to the World Bank's *Doing Business 2014 report*, which assessed business regulations in 189 countries, Georgia ranked 8<sup>th</sup> globally. Additionally, the *Enterprise Survey 2013* by the World Bank found that 85.8% of entrepreneurs did not view corruption as an obstacle to business. Transparency International's *Global Corruption Barometer 2013 indicated* that only 4% of Georgians had paid a bribe in the past year. Moreover, Georgia ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> in the 2014 *Index of Economic Freedom* by the Heritage Foundation.

Before the DCFTA negotiations began, Georgia had already made substantial progress in trade diversification and demonstrated resilience in navigating the Russian trade embargo. By 2011, the EU accounted for 27% of Georgia's trade, with Türkiye (16%), Azerbaijan (11%), and Ukraine (9%) among its top trading partners. Notably, Germany, Bulgaria, and Italy—three EU member states—were also in Georgia's top ten trading partners. At the same time, Russia's share of Georgia's exports was negligible at just 2%.

This solid foundation provided a promising starting point for Georgia to benefit from the DCFTA. Among other opportunities, it positioned the country to attract trade-related foreign direct investment (FDI) by offering a competitive environment for production and export to the EU. Georgia had the potential to function as a trade and investment hub for the broader region, provided it engaged in targeted FDI promotion to draw investment into value-added production sectors. The combination of an internationally competitive business climate and advantageous trade regimes gave Georgia a unique comparative advantage.

## Georgia's FTAs



***Interestingly, even today, Georgia's potential to position itself as a regional trade hub and to expand and diversify its economic relations remains theoretically strong.***

Interestingly, even today, Georgia's potential to position itself as a regional trade hub and to expand and diversify its economic relations remains theoretically strong. The necessary preconditions are in place, yet the tangible impact is lacking. Recent [discussions](#) about the strategic importance of the Middle Corridor further highlight Georgia's potential role, but this remains largely unrealized in practice.

Georgia currently enjoys a free trade regime with markets encompassing 2.2 billion people, representing 27% of the world's population and accounting for 40% of the global GDP. This includes both advanced and rapidly growing economies, such as the EU, EFTA, and Hong Kong, as well as major regional players like Türkiye and China. Additionally, Georgia has a free trade agreement (FTA) with all

CIS countries. As demonstrated above, Georgia's network of FTAs is both extensive and distinctive.

In the decade leading up to the implementation of the DCFTA, Georgia's trade with the EU grew at an average annual rate of 16%, while exports from Georgia to the EU increased by 18% annually. Notably, this growth occurred without any bilateral free trade agreement in place. Therefore, it was anticipated that the DCFTA could drive significant trade expansion with the EU, albeit more likely in the long rather than the short term.

### Deterioration of Trade

The entry into force of the DCFTA coincided with Russia's gradual lifting of its trade embargo, which started in 2013 and led to a steady increase in Georgian exports to Russia. This shift was a direct outcome of the Georgian Dream's policy of resetting relations with Russia. While exports to Russia accounted for only 2% of Georgia's total exports in 2012, this figure rose to nearly 11% by 2023. Over time, Georgia's economy has grown increasingly dependent on Russia—a country that occu-



pies one-fifth of its territory and actively opposes Western influence in the region.

A key factor influencing Georgia-EU trade dynamics has been the change in government just two years before the DCFTA took effect. In 2012, the change in power brought an economic policy shift under the new leadership, which was significantly less focused on pro-growth and pro-business reforms aimed at attracting foreign investment, fostering diversification, and driving growth. This policy shift resulted in a slowdown in economic growth.

For instance, between 2004 and 2012, Georgia's GDP per capita in nominal terms increased fourfold, rising from USD 1,035 in 2003 to USD 4,518. During this period, the average annual GDP growth in nominal USD terms reached 18.7% despite the dual shocks of the 2008 Russian invasion and the 2009 global financial crisis. In contrast, the average annual GDP growth in nominal USD terms slowed to just 6.3% between 2013 and 2023. This level of growth is insufficient for a developing economy like Georgia to achieve substantial progress in economic development and prosperity. Furthermore, much of the recent growth over the past two to three years has been driven by the inflow of Russian capital and immigration in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

***A retrospective analysis of political and economic dynamics, coupled with the Georgian Dream government's recent decision to effectively freeze the EU accession process for the entire four-year legislative period, highlights the decline in trade flows between the EU and Georgia.***

A retrospective analysis of political and economic dynamics, coupled with the Georgian Dream government's recent decision to effectively freeze

the EU accession process for the entire four-year legislative period, highlights the decline in trade flows between the EU and Georgia. The causes of this deterioration are primarily political rather than economic.

For years, the GD government touted the conclusion of the DCFTA with the EU as evidence of its pro-European foreign policy, positioning itself as the force steering Georgia toward EU integration. However, it failed to implement critical policies and reforms necessary to stimulate economic growth, promote private sector development, and attract foreign direct investment —all of which are essential for expanding trade.

Attracting investment is vital for creating jobs, driving growth, and fostering prosperity in a small, FDI-dependent economy like Georgia, where domestic capital is limited. The DCFTA had the potential to deliver long-term benefits, but only if it had been integrated into a broader economic and trade policy framework aimed at deepening trade and economic ties with the West.

Instead, the GD government's lack of reforms gradually weakened trade interdependence between Georgia and the EU. This erosion laid the groundwork for the recent decision to suspend Georgia's EU membership efforts as declining economic ties mirrored the government's growing anti-EU orientation. With the GD leadership now openly distancing itself from the EU, Georgia's limited economic interdependence with the EU has left little to constrain or influence this shift.

Table 1 below summarizes Georgia's key trade indicators and compares overall trade dynamics and trade with the EU ten years before and after the entry into force of the DCFTA in 2014. It is clear that just before the entry into force of the DCFTA, Georgia's overall trade performance was much stronger and grew quickly, even without having a free trade agreement in place. Overall trade in

**Table 1: Trade Dynamics in Georgia in 2004-2013 vs 2014-2023**

Trade Indicators	2004-2013 Average Growth	2014-2023 Average Growth
Exports	15%	6%
Imports	15%	5%
Total Trade	16%	6%
Exports to the EU	18%	1%
Imports from the EU	15%	4%
Total Trade with the EU	16%	4%

Source: Geostat

2004-2013 grew by 16%, whereas the same figure was just 6% in 2014-2024. The exports to the EU also grew by 15% in contrast to just 6% in 2014-2024.

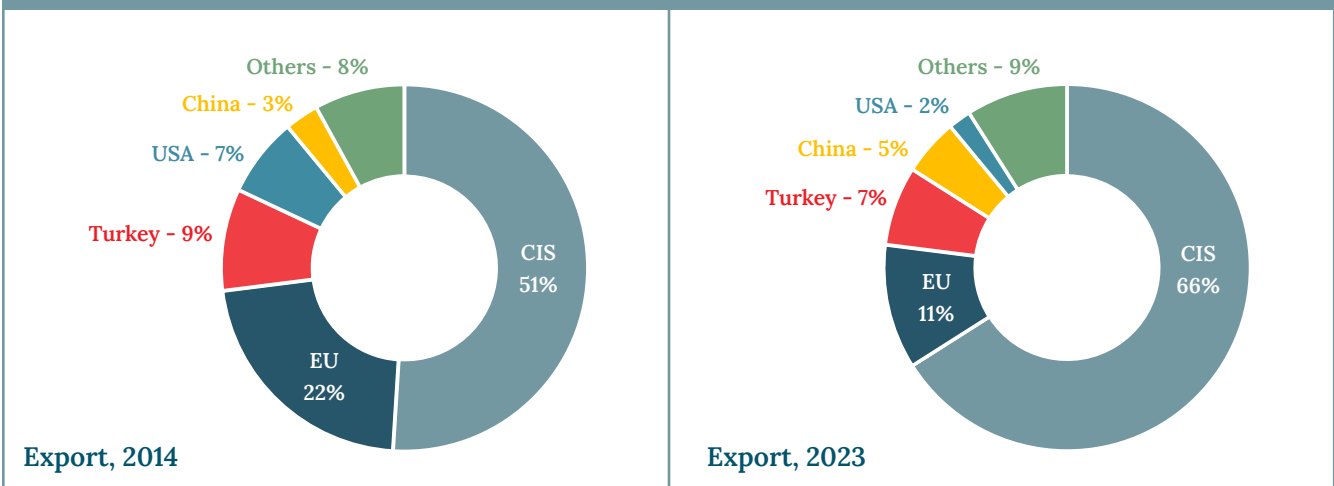
Moreover, since the DCFTA entered into force, Georgia’s export structure by commodity has not changed significantly. However, several new products (e.g., kiwi, dried lemon, persimmon, blueberry, quince, fruit jams, honey, pet furniture, and glass bottles) have been exported to the EU market in minimal quantities since 2014 (See the table above).

The initial phase of DCFTA implementation went in parallel with the intensification of Georgia’s trade

relations with Russia and the fortification of Russian political and economic influence in Georgia – first disguised under the EU integration objective and now openly visible, manifested among others in the stance of Georgia’s government concerning the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the adoption of Russian type laws, and engaging in open confrontation with Western partners. The rigged elections of 2024 were just a culmination of this trend.

As the chart below demonstrates, Georgia’s share of total exports to the EU was reduced substantially between 2014 and 2023—from 22% to 11%. In the same ten years, the share of the EU and US diminished whereas the share of the CIS increased as did the share of exports to China.

**Chart 1: Georgia’s Export Structure 2014 vs 2023**



## DCFTA's Positive Impact

Despite the slowdown in EU-Georgia trade relations, the DCFTA has still had a twofold positive impact on Georgia.

First, while the trade-related effects of the DCFTA have been modest, its broader impact on trade liberalization has been substantial. Specifically, the conclusion of the DCFTA catalyzed the initiation and finalization of several other free trade agreements. Agreements were reached with EFTA in 2016 (effective 2017), China in 2017 (effective 2018), and Hong Kong in 2018 (effective 2019). The increased interest in the Georgian market from partner countries was directly linked to the EU free trade deal. Theoretically, Georgia offers expanded opportunities for production within its market, leveraging a relatively favorable business environment to export goods to the EU duty-free. This aspect represents a highly valuable and beneficial by-product of the DCFTA. However, the potential benefits remain underutilized due to the lack of a consolidated government strategy to position Georgia as a trade hub with unique trade opportunities.

Second, the DCFTA has driven significant legal and institutional reforms to meet its approximation requirements. Its implementation has necessitated policy changes, including establishing new state institutions or enhancing existing ones with expanded functions and introducing state control and oversight across almost all areas covered by the agreement. These reforms have increased costs for both private businesses and the state. Ideally, these costs should be offset by deeper economic integration with the EU, leading to more significant trade and investment volumes and, ultimately, higher economic growth.

Overall, Georgia fulfilled DCFTA-related obligations without significant setbacks, at least until the recent suspension of the EU integration efforts by the GD. While trade and economic alignment with the EU have largely remained on track, a thorough assessment is needed to determine whether the implemented changes adequately align with the DCFTA's objectives and whether the related institutions uphold integrity, transparency, and anti-corruption principles. If Georgia resumes its EU accession efforts, these reforms could establish a strong foundation for eventual EU membership.

In summary, the trade-related benefits of the DCFTA for Georgia have been modest or virtually non-existent so far. There has been no significant growth in trade volumes, and the structure of exports has not undergone substantial change. While the free trade agreement offers opportunities akin to a champagne pyramid, political and democracy-related problems act as an impenetrable layer, preventing the benefits from trickling down to the broader economy. This limited impact must be viewed in the context of deteriorating relations between Georgia and the EU and Georgia's increasing political and economic alignment with Russia. Without a dramatic shift in Georgia's foreign policy approach, trade and economic relations with the EU will unlikely improve. Western investors and traders will be hesitant to restore trust without clear evidence that Georgia is committed to its European future and is willing to capitalize on existing economic frameworks. Unfortunately, this seems improbable under the current leadership ■

# The Line They Don't Cross

## Why Georgia's Armed Forces Stay Out of Politics?

“**W**e don't have an army, we don't have weapons, and we won't have any” - this clumsy phrase [uttered](#) by Salome Zourabichvili in December 2019 was intended to emphasize the importance of education and science for the country's development. The remark, understandably, sparked widespread criticism. As the commander-in-chief, the president was accused of disrespecting the armed forces. This was one of many gaffes attributed to Ms. Zourabichvili. Still, upon closer examination, her words were not far from the reality of Georgia's military, particularly after years of Georgian Dream (GD) governance.

As Georgia descends into a political crisis sparked by the Georgian Dream's largely manipulated elections and the suspension of the European integra-

tion process, with citizens taking to the streets daily to confront police brutality, many are questioning the potential role of the armed forces. Will they be deployed by the authorities to suppress the protests, or could they stand with the people in their pursuit of freedom, democracy, and a European future?

The hypothesis cautiously proposed here is that barring extraordinary circumstances—such as unprecedented violence, mass bloodshed, or immense pressure from the regime—the military is likely to remain on the sidelines. This stance can be attributed both to deep-seated historical trends that have shaped Georgia's modern identity and to more recent factors tied to the GD's style of governance.



**THORNIKE GORDADZE**  
Contributor

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



## From Foreign Entity to a Lack of Prestige

***Unlike European nation-states, where civilian control over the military was a cornerstone, or Türkiye and other Middle Eastern countries, where armies often acted as political guardians of secularism, Georgia's military development has been shaped by its unique cultural, political, and historical circumstances.***

The role of Georgia's regular armed forces has historically differed from both European and Middle Eastern models. Unlike European nation-states, where civilian control over the military was a cornerstone, or Türkiye and other Middle Eastern countries, where armies often acted as political

guardians of secularism, Georgia's military development has been shaped by its unique cultural, political, and historical circumstances.

During Georgia's brief First Republic (1918–1921), efforts were made to establish structured civil-military relations and a capable military, achieving some notable successes against neighboring adversaries. However, the republic's armed forces were ultimately no match for the Red Army, which invaded and occupied Georgia in 1921. This resulted in Sovietization and its absorption into a new imperial framework.

The Soviet Union, unlike its predecessors, aimed to sever ties with the past by systematically dismantling the former military elite. This purge particularly targeted Georgian officers from the Tsarist Army and the First Republic, most of whom came from non-proletarian backgrounds. Many

were executed, purged, or forced into exile. Within the Soviet framework, the military held a politically subordinate role despite its immense size and firepower. Under the control of the Communist Party and the Ministry of Defense, it functioned as an instrument of state power, closely monitored by the KGB and political officers (*zampolits*) to ensure strict ideological compliance. After Stalin's era, leadership in the military was predominantly reserved for Party members, with over 90% of officers belonging to the Communist Party or its youth organization, the Komsomol. This structure of military-political relations was replicated in most Soviet successor states, including Georgia.

The Soviet Union's ability to avoid military coups throughout its existence is a testament to the Communist Party's tight grip on power. The only significant instance of military defiance occurred during the August 1991 coup attempt when elite units refused to obey the conspirators' orders.

For Georgians, the [Soviet military](#) often felt like a “foreign” institution. Inter-ethnic tensions were frequent, with clashes between soldiers from different ethnic groups compounded by language barriers that disadvantaged non-Slavic recruits. Proficiency in Russian, the army's official language of command, was crucial for career progression. However, in 1989, only 31% of Georgians reported fluency in Russian, and even fewer could write it proficiently. This linguistic barrier and cultural differences meant that Georgian officers who advanced to high ranks were often culturally Russified, distancing them from Georgian society.

In the early 1990s, as Georgia set out to build its own armed forces, the Soviet legacy loomed large. Ethnic Georgian generals from the Soviet military, such as Nadibaidze and Kamkamidze, were invited to join the new national army. However, many of these officers struggled with the Georgian language, underscoring the cultural and institutional imprint of the Soviet era. This disconnect high-

lighted the immense challenge of creating a cohesive national army from a fragmented and Sovietized military elite.

Non-Russians and non-Slavs faced systemic barriers in the Soviet military. Slavs dominated combat and elite units, with Russians alone comprising 69.5% of the officer corps, far exceeding their 50.8% population share. Non-Slavs were overrepresented in non-combat roles, reinforcing perceptions of inequality within the armed forces.

Initially, the Red Army included national units with territorial recruitment, allowing soldiers to serve in their home regions. However, as Bolshevik leaders grew wary of these units, they were disbanded by 1938. Briefly revived during World War II for mobilization purposes, they were dismantled again in the 1950s. Georgian divisions, prominent during the war, were dissolved after 1956 following the brutal repression of protests in Tbilisi. The refusal of Georgian soldiers to participate in the crackdown underscored their alienation from the Soviet military system, and the army's actions shattered the wartime camaraderie of World War II. The Red Army, once glorified by Soviet propaganda, was increasingly viewed by Georgians as an occupying force.

By the late Soviet period, military service had become deeply unattractive to Georgians. The trauma of the 1956 repression, coupled with economic, social, and ideological factors, further alienated them from the military. Unlike the Tsarist army, the Red Army's officer corps offered limited opportunities for Georgians. While Stalin's era briefly elevated Georgian officers, destalinization and the execution of Beria led to the decline of Georgian influence in Moscow. Many Georgians shifted their ambitions to local opportunities in the Communist Party, the KGB, or the Ministry of Interior, providing better social mobility prospects and access to informal economic networks.

From the 1960s onward, military professions were largely excluded from the ranks of Georgia's Soviet elite. Society underwent a "gentrification" process where cultural and intellectual elites—such as artists, writers, academics, and entertainers—rose to prominence alongside Communist Party leaders and state enterprise directors. This group formed a privileged class that endured even after the collapse of the USSR. Military officers, particularly those from provincial backgrounds, were left out of this elite circle, unable to attain significant social prestige despite their aspirations.

Even within Georgia, military institutions like the Tbilisi Higher Artillery School saw limited participation from ethnic Georgians. Soviet data consistently placed Georgians among the lowest in generals per capita, with only around 120 Georgian generals throughout Soviet history. This lack of prestige in military careers continued after independence even though the military remained one of Georgia's most trusted institutions, alongside the church.

The legacy of the Soviet era left an indelible mark on Georgia's military development. After independence, efforts to build a professional and autonomous military faced significant challenges, including the lingering influence of Soviet structures and the social and cultural dynamics that shaped Georgian society.

## Solders or Fighters? Post-Soviet Chaos and Militia Politics

***The collapse of the Soviet army left Georgia without the necessary officers or material base to build a new military.***

The collapse of the Soviet army left Georgia without the necessary officers or material base to build a new military. Defense and security were critical for the young state, but informal armed groups,

starkly contrasting the Huntingtonian idea of the professional, apolitical soldier, filled the vacuum left by the Soviet collapse. In the 1990s, the military landscape of Georgia was dominated by the figure of the "warrior-militiaman," whose presence was shaped by the civil war and the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, fueled by Russian-backed separatists. This chaotic environment blurred the legal and illegal domains between military and non-military.

The civil war, which began in December 1991, created conditions for militias to intervene in politics, with some even attempting to overthrow the government by force. In December 1991, an armed rebellion by a faction of the National Guard, allied with the Mkhedrioni militia, toppled President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Similar mutinies and coup attempts followed throughout the decade, underscoring the instability of the period. Unlike professional armies led by autonomous officers, militias comprised individuals with political affiliations and personal interests, driven less by a desire to defend the state and more by ambitions to control or exert influence. Eliminating militias and the professionalization of Georgia's armed forces by the late 1990s eventually ended these political interventions, which disappeared entirely by the late 2000s.

The origins of Georgian militias were rooted in the waning control of Moscow during Gorbachev's era and the rise of nationalist movements. Early armed groups were often linked to political organizations, recruiting members through networks of friends, relatives, and neighbors. These groups attracted a mix of ideologues committed to independence and marginalized individuals, including former criminals and rebels. This convergence of worlds produced a militia culture that historian Stephen F. Jones described as "autonomous organizations led by 'brothers' or 'buddies' (*dzmakatsebi*)."<sup>1</sup> Major political parties like the National Democratic Party, the Georgian Helsinki Union, and the Pop-

ular Front had their armed formations. Over time, militias such as the Mkhedrioni and Tetri Artzivi (White Eagle) transitioned into political entities, further blurring the line between political and military spheres.

Ethnic tensions also significantly influenced the formation of militias. Armed groups emerged in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, ostensibly to defend ethnic communities. These groups, however, often exacerbated divisions, deepening the cycle of violence. The militias' focus on ethnic identity and community defense underscored their role as fragmented, localized forces rather than unified state institutions.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also discredited the ethos and prestige of the regular soldier. Young Georgians, disillusioned by the Soviet military's failures, were drawn instead to the camaraderie and perceived glamour of militias. As Charles Fairbanks Jr. noted, the "strange glamour" of post-Soviet paramilitaries, with their informality and defiance of traditional military discipline, contrasted sharply with the regimented life of regular soldiers. The motivations for joining militias were often more social than ideological, driven by loyalty, friendship, or fascination with militia leaders, many of whom had no prior military experience. Figures like Loti Kobalia, a bakery truck driver; Akaki Eliava, a theatre technician, and Jaba Ioseliani, a writer-dramatist, embodied the militia culture, emphasizing personal charisma and networks over military professionalism.

Far from the Huntingtonian model of the professional soldier disconnected from societal dynamics, Georgia's militiamen were deeply embedded in their communities. Their personal ties and societal roles shaped their actions, interests, and worldviews. This integration blurred the boundaries between the military and civilian spheres, complicating efforts to establish a professional and autonomous military institution.

The onset of the civil war created a chaotic system where political, administrative, and military domains became indistinguishable. Armed groups became indispensable for political and economic survival, fostering new forms of wealth accumulation and informal governance. This system entrenched a predatory economy where the support of armed groups was essential for political and economic relevance. These dynamics perpetuated the militia phenomenon until the late 1990s, when efforts to professionalize Georgia's armed forces began to consolidate state control over legitimate violence. However, the legacies of this period, including blurred institutional boundaries and fragmented authority, continued to influence Georgia's military and political development in the following years.

## **The End of Militias, Corruption, and Political Engagement in the Army (1996–2004)**

By the late 1990s, militias had been mainly disbanded, and Eduard Shevardnadze's consolidation of power reassured Western partners. However, this "stabilization" fell short of expectations for a strong, functional state as corruption deeply infiltrated legal enforcement structures. The police and the Ministry of the Interior became Shevardnadze's primary power base but were notorious for widespread racketeering targeting both citizens and businesses.

Although the military gained some respect by retreating to the barracks, it was also plagued by corruption. Conscript practices, equipment procurement, and inflated personnel rosters became avenues for illicit gains. By the late 1990s, while the military budget accounted for around 40,000 personnel, only 10,000 soldiers were actually serving, allowing Defense Ministry officials to profit from the discrepancy.



Despite Western pressure to streamline the security apparatus, Georgia maintained over a dozen security services. Efforts to reform these structures risked destabilizing the fragile system, as demonstrated by the National Guard [mutiny](#) in 2001, which was defused only after Shevardnadze assured the unit it would not be disbanded.

***Military tensions also reflected Georgia's geopolitical orientation as it was caught between Russia and the West.***

Military tensions also reflected Georgia's geopolitical orientation as it was caught between Russia and the West. The Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP), [launched](#) in 2002 with USD 64 million in US aid, symbolized growing Western influence, sparking Russian concerns over NATO expansion. Pro-Russian and pro-Western factions clashed within the armed forces, exemplified by the 2001 Mukhrovani mutiny, which aimed to discredit pro-Western reforms.

By 2003, internal military dissent had intensified. Special Forces officers publicly [resigned](#), citing poor conditions and funding. Analysts linked this act to rising tensions between Shevardnadze and pro-Western reformers, foreshadowing the Rose Revolution later that year.

## **Post-Rose Revolution Georgia: Achieving Combat Readiness by Radical Reforms and Political Control**

The United National Movement (UNM) government that came to power following the Rose Revolution inherited an army of paupers whose hierarchy was steeped in corruption and where, except for several small elite units equipped and trained by the Americans and other NATO partners, the soldiers were not adequately fed, clothed and shod.

The armed forces' [budget](#) in 2003 was only GEL 67 million (USD 31 million), representing only 1.1% of the GDP. The new government began to reform the army with the same enthusiasm as other state structures. The army budget grew exponentially to reach GEL 160 million in 2004 (USD 77 million and 1.4% of the GDP) and GEL 358 million GEL (USD 197 million and 3.3% of the GDP) in 2005. But the record budget was reached in 2007-2008: the equivalent of GEL 1.5-1.6 billion or USD 893-847 million and 8.5-9% of the GDP. These record increases were to finance the radical transformation of the army to bring it up to NATO standards, to the extent that membership of the latter, with the restoration of territorial integrity, was the number one geopolitical objective.

***Between 2006 and 2008, Georgia undertook a significant effort to enhance its army's combat capabilities, purchasing record amounts of equipment from NATO member states and Israel.***

Between 2006 and 2008, Georgia undertook a significant effort to enhance its army's combat capabilities, purchasing record amounts of equipment from NATO member states and Israel. The Saakashvili government also raised the salaries of soldiers and officers to curb corruption, channeling substantial funds into rapidly constructing new military infrastructure, bases, and hospitals. Georgia launched its military industry through the state-owned company Delta to further strengthen defense capabilities, which produced armored vehicles (Didgori) and drones. Participation in international coalitions, such as the US-led mission in [Iraq](#) and NATO's ISAF operation in [Afghanistan](#), was also expanded to improve interoperability with Western forces.

However, political control over the army during the United National Movement's rule presented several challenges. The post-Rose Revolution lead-

ership viewed absolute loyalty from the military as essential, given its capacity for violence and fire-power. With a sincere commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration and a confrontational stance toward Russia—already employing hybrid tactics and direct aggression in 2008—the government sought to purge the army of pro-Russian elements and individuals deemed disloyal or susceptible to manipulation by hostile forces.

Some experts contend that political control over the military increased under Saakashvili's presidency compared to the pre-Rose Revolution era. This control was intended to create a highly combat-ready force aligned with Georgia's pro-Western orientation and committed to Euro-Atlantic integration.

During the United National Movement's nearly nine years in power, Georgia had seven defense ministers, with only three—Okruashvili, Kezerashvili, and Akhalaia—serving for more than a year. Experts agree that such frequent turnover is far from ideal for establishing the foundations of a new military. The political leadership, emboldened by its dramatic success in police reform—most notably the creation of the Patrol Police and improvements in crime statistics—believed that similar methods could rapidly transform the armed forces. This approach demanded strict obedience from military officers to the political leadership, including the defense minister and deputies.

The government's strategy involved replacing entrenched figures with younger, honest individuals untainted by corruption. However, unlike police reform, where rapid personnel changes yielded immediate results, building a professional military requires more time and expertise. While replacing corrupt police officers with motivated, inexperienced recruits had a notable impact, applying the same formula to the military proved far more challenging. Training professional soldiers and culti-

vating an effective command structure is a lengthy process that does not lend itself to quick fixes.

Promotion within the military was often based on loyalty rather than merit, leading to opportunistic officers adapting their positions to align with the prevailing political climate. For instance, Colonel Levan Nikoleishvili, a protégé of Defense Minister Okruashvili and head of the General Staff, became an [advocate](#) of the “doctrine of neutrality” and a favored expert on pro-Georgian Dream television channels after the change in government. His shift in rhetoric coincided with the growing influence of pro-Russian propaganda within these outlets.

Following the August 2008 war with Russia, which ended in a defeat for Georgian forces, military spending decreased significantly. By 2012, shortly before the Georgian Dream came to power, the defense budget had dropped to GEL 812 million (approximately USD 362 million and 3% of the GDP). This decline reflected the diminished focus on military procurement and modernization in the post-war period.

## Georgian Dream: The Army as Administrative Resource

An analysis of Georgia's defense policy under the Georgian Dream reveals that combat readiness and national defense are not top priorities. The 2024 [defense budget](#) of GEL 1,380 million (approximately USD 460 million) is less than half the amount allocated in 2007 and represents just 1.6% of the GDP—a stark contrast to Azerbaijan and Armenia's defense spending of 6-7% of the GDP. Of this budget, two-thirds are allocated to salaries and pensions, with only 10% directed toward equipment and training. The ground forces, officially listed as 20,000 troops, realistically operate with 10,000-12,000 soldiers, while Georgia has effectively abandoned its navy and air force.

The GD government views war as unwinnable and treats the military as a social support system rather than a defense force. Soldiers, mainly from modest backgrounds, are provided with decent salaries, housing benefits, and even spiritual resources such as [camouflage-patterned Bibles](#), often supplied by “friendly” companies through opaque procurement practices. In return, the military is expected to maintain loyalty to the regime, particularly during elections. Soldiers avoid dissent to safeguard their benefits and financial security.

The military has also been leveraged as a diplomatic tool to foster defense ties with the United States, countering criticism of the GD’s perceived pro-Russian leanings. However, with the GD’s recent pivot toward Moscow, cooperation with the US on defense matters has stalled, raising concerns about the loyalty and morale within the armed forces. While senior commanders are appointed mainly based on their loyalty to the government, many mid- and lower-ranking officers remain staunchly pro-Western, shaped by their experiences in the 2008 war against Russia and Georgia’s prior Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

***The GD relies on the Ministry of Interior forces, supplemented by semi-criminal groups, to manage protests, avoiding direct involvement of the army, which could risk defection under extreme circumstances.***

The GD relies on the Ministry of Interior forces, supplemented by semi-criminal groups, to manage protests, avoiding direct involvement of the army, which could risk defection under extreme circumstances. The GD’s 12-year purge of critical elements in the military has led to 3,000 former soldiers joining Ukrainian units, highlighting the regime’s strategy of sidelining dissenting voices within the armed forces.

As noted earlier, political control over the military was already a feature of the United National Movement. However, under the Georgian Dream, this control has reached unprecedented levels, largely due to the enhanced roles of three key entities: the Military Police, the General Inspectorate of the Armed Forces, and Counter-Military Espionage. These agencies, alongside the State Security Service (SUS)—a politically loyal apparatus and the GD’s primary instrument for retaining power—play a central role in monitoring the armed forces.

Rather than physically deploying the army, the GD appears tempted to leverage its prestige to counter critics of electoral fraud and the suspension of European integration. Public opinion polls consistently [show](#) the army as one of Georgia’s most trusted institutions, often competing with or even surpassing the Orthodox Church in popularity. This trust makes the army an appealing symbol for the regime, which is desperate for signs of legitimacy amid a contested parliament, government, and presidency.

Unlike the Church, which is not institutionally dependent on the government and often vocal in its support of GD policies, the army remains largely silent. While dissenting voices exist within the clergy, the Church largely aligns with the regime. The army, by contrast, is presumed to have a higher share of pro-Western personnel but maintains a much quieter stance, potentially due to institutional dependence on government structures.

The regime’s precarious legitimacy has led it to tread carefully in its dealings with the military. A clear example was the inauguration of the GD’s new, pro-Russian president—a former footballer—in a low-profile ceremony lasting just 25 minutes, held behind closed doors to avoid public dissent. Although the president is constitutionally the commander-in-chief, the regime avoided staging a military parade, fearing potential backlash. Instead, it settled for inviting a few high-ranking

officers, including the Chief of Staff, to create the appearance of institutional support while carefully scrutinizing outgoing President Zourabichvili's remarks to the military to prevent her from rallying their loyalty.

***The freeze in Western cooperation with the Georgian armed forces has left them more vulnerable to the regime's influence.***

The freeze in Western cooperation with the Georgian armed forces has left them more vulnerable to the regime's influence. Participation in international programs previously offered the military some protection from pressure by GD-aligned entities like the SUS, the Military Police, and the General Inspectorate. However, while the GD has avoided overtly escalating control over the army, it remains cautious about provoking a backlash.

Predicting the regime's next steps toward the military is challenging, particularly if the crisis deepens. The GD would prefer the protests to lose momentum and the international community to accept the status quo, avoiding the need for extreme measures such as declaring a state of emergency and enforcing it with military involvement. However, if protests persist, sanctions intensify, the economic crisis worsens, and the regime's base erodes, the GD will face two choices: either escalate repression by turning the army into an extension of the Ministry of the Interior's special forces or concede to demands for new elections.

Ultimately, Bidzina Ivanishvili will make the decision, weighing the comparative risks of these options. The outcome remains uncertain, and much will depend on the evolving dynamics of domestic unrest and international pressure ■

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