

# GEO POLITICS

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# **GEO POLITICS**

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# 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.



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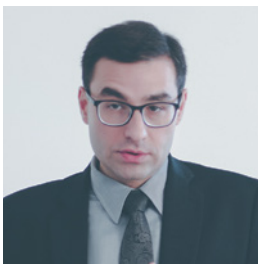
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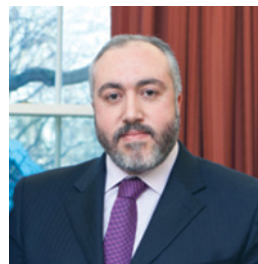
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# Sanctions Alone Won't Change Oligarch's Anti-Western Choice

**G**eorgia's recent adoption of the "Law on the Transparency of Foreign Influence" has thrust the nation into uncharted waters. The West's impending sanctions on the Georgian Government carry significant implications for the country's future, particularly the outcome of the 2024 October Parliamentary Elections.

While Georgians celebrate the National Football Team's qualification and successful performance at Euro 2024, political weather in the country is getting stormy. Once the jubilation is over, polarization will return, and civil society's and political opposition's profound disagreement with the Government over the country's foreign policy course will set the tone for the upcoming Parliamentary elections. The role of global actors in Georgian elections will be profound, and the instruments the EU and the US will choose to deal with the authoritarian oligarchic regime in Tbilisi will largely determine the country's trajectory for the next decade.

This volume opens with Sergi Kapanadze's piece on the anatomy of the oligarchic regime in Georgia, which dwells on the article in the previous issue. After exploring state capture in various fields of governance in [Part 1](#) of the analysis, the author examines the tactics employed by the oligarch to fragment the political spectrum, weaken opposition parties, manipulate the electoral process, vilify the NGO sector, misuse the state security service for political gains, exploit the Georgian Orthodox Church, and control the economy and financial flows for the benefit of its power.

Jaba Devdariani pays tribute to the recurrent mass protests on Rustaveli Avenue and their broader implications for Georgian democracy and argues that the persistent public mobilization against sitting governments is driven by a lack of vertical and horizontal accountability within the political system, exacerbated by a winner-takes-all mentality and electoral system distortions. The article underscores the role of civil society and public protests as "diagonal accountability," crucial for expressing public discontent and seeking political change without robust institutional checks and balances. The article concludes that addressing Georgia's accountability issues and reducing the influence of oligarchic capital is essential for its democratic and European future.

Shota Gvineria follows up with an analysis of the Georgian Dream's increasing alignment with authoritarian regimes like Russia, Iran, and China. This shift has led to escalating authoritarian measures against local dissent and strained relations with Western allies. The West's remaining options to influence Georgia include imposing sanctions and supporting pro-democracy forces. The article outlines three potential outcomes for Georgia: the successful imposition of authoritarian laws, leading to a Belarus-like state; civil unrest and potential Russian intervention; or, under strategic U.S. pressure, the holding of free and fair elections. The author stresses the urgency for active support and decisive action from Georgia's Western allies to prevent Georgia's further drift into authoritarianism and alignment with Russia, which poses significant risks to regional stability and Western interests.

Temuri Yakobashvili and Sergi Kapanadze then step in with a joint piece criticizing the ineffectiveness of Western sanctions in changing authoritarian regimes' policies and arguing that sanctions should instead aim to alert the Georgian public to change their government in the upcoming elections. The article highlights how authoritarian leaders often project resilience under sanctions and use them to bolster their propaganda against the West. The Georgian Dream (GD) party has similarly dismissed fears of sanctions. Still, the authors argue that timely, public, and well-targeted sanctions could prevent the GD from portraying its international isolation as a success. The article emphasizes the need for visa bans and financial sanctions to be more visible and impactful, targeting not just the rank-and-file individuals responsible for anti-democratic actions but mainly the "big boss" – Bidzina Ivanishvili. Authors advocate for a robust "sticks-and-carrots" approach, with clear consequences for continuing anti-democratic policies and attractive incentives for democratic reforms. In their view, the ultimate goal should be to generate negative public sentiment towards the GD, leading to a change in government through the October parliamentary elections.

Vano Chkhikvadze picks up on one of the widely discussed EU response measures - the potential suspension of Georgia's visa-free travel. The EU granted visa liberalization to Georgia in 2017, allowing Georgians to travel without visas, but this privilege is conditional on adherence to European values and human rights. Recent legislation in Georgia, particularly the adoption of Russian-style foreign influence and anti-LGBTQI laws, has raised concerns about Georgia's compliance

with these conditions. The article discusses the criteria under which the EU can suspend visa liberalization, including substantial increases in irregular migration, asylum applications, and security risks. The decision to suspend visas is complex, balancing technical data and political considerations. While suspension would signal disapproval of Georgia's political direction, it risks fueling anti-European sentiments and propaganda from the ruling Georgian Dream party. The article underscores the delicate balance the EU must maintain in its response, considering the potential impact on ordinary Georgian citizens and civil society activists.

Thornike Gordadze closes the volume with an analysis of the impact of the 2024 European Parliament elections on the EU's political balance and its implications for candidate countries like Georgia. Despite propaganda from Georgian Dream leaders about the surge of GD-friendly conservatism in Europe, the reality is more nuanced, with the pro-European majority maintaining their position and the Far-Right remaining divided and in the minority. The article discusses the Far-Right's divided stance on Russia and EU enlargement, with some parties supporting Ukraine and others maintaining ambiguous ties to Moscow. The GD views Far-Right gains as beneficial, hoping for reduced democratic conditionality for EU candidate states. The upcoming snap elections in France and Germany's Far-Right surge could influence EU enlargement policies, impacting Georgia's European aspirations ■

With Respect,  
**Editorial Team**

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# Anatomy and Chronology of a State Capture in Georgia (Part 2)

In the previous volume of *GEOPolitics*, I described how Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream (GD) party monopolized political power in the Parliament, captured executive and judiciary branches, and asserted control over essential media resources.

However, it is essential to note that the mere capture of state institutions does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the extent of the problem facing Georgia's democracy. To fully grasp the situation, we must also examine how state capture resulted in the fragmentation of the political spectrum, weakened opposition parties, manipulation of the electoral system, defamation of the NGO sector, misuse of the state security service for political gain, an alliance with the Georgian Orthodox Church, and control of the economy and financial flows.

## Demonizing the Opposition

Since 2013, Bidzina Ivanishvili has positioned the Georgian Dream against the former government

by addressing the United National Movement's (UNM) significant "failures," such as improving human rights in prisons, issuing a controversial broad amnesty (including the release of convicted Russian spies), and implementing socially oriented policies like universal healthcare. However, the hallmark of the Georgian Dream-led government has been the monopolization of various government branches, including local government, and the deliberate portrayal of the UNM, particularly Mikheil Saakashvili and his party, as the public enemy. This strategy of demonizing the political opposition relied on three main tactics: physical assaults, negative PR campaigns, and arrests and persecutions of opposition figures.

***This strategy of demonizing the political opposition relied on three main tactics: physical assaults, negative PR campaigns, and arrests and persecutions of opposition figures.***

From its early days in power, the Georgian Dream party has encouraged and even financed groups



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to physically assault senior opposition figures, creating a perception that the public widely disliked these politicians. Notable incidents included public beatings of opposition politicians like [Nugzar Tsiklauri](#) and Zurab Tchiaberashvili, mass assaults in [Kortskheli](#), and attacks on [Nika Gvaramia](#). There were also planned [assaults](#) on Gigi Ugulava and Giorgi Gabashvili, as well as numerous lower-ranking opposition figures. In 2024 alone, several opposition politicians were severely beaten while protesting the foreign agents bill. The former UNM chairman, Levan Khabeishvili, [suffered](#) such severe injuries that he had to step down from the party leadership position. MP Aleko Elisashvili was [beaten](#) by police on camera, resulting in broken ribs, and prominent opposition activist David Katsarava was so severely [injured](#) that he required surgery on his eye socket.

The violence against opposition activists intensified in April-May 2024, with Georgian Dream supporters ambushing and severely beating opposition politicians near their homes on multiple occasions. Despite these assaults, none of the perpetrators or organizers have been arrested, even as a prominent Georgian Dream MP boasted on social media about being behind these attacks.

The Georgian Dream has prosecuted and imprisoned the former President, the former Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior, the former Minister of Defense, and the former Mayor of Tbilisi at various times from 2013 to 2021. The pinnacle of arresting political opponents was when the former chairman of the UNM, Nika Melia, was detained in the party office as a result of a special operation. The promise of “restoration of justice,” a principal pre-electoral pledge of the Georgian Dream, would thus seem to have been kept. However, the Georgian Dream keeps the sword of Damocles of violence over the opposition parties, threatening their political and legal persecution even after the October 2024 elections. Bidzina

Ivanishvili [promised](#) precisely that during his ominous 29 April address to GD supporters.

The non-stop legal and propaganda pressure on the main opposition party, the UNM, led to its numerous break-ups in 2017-2024, splinter groups attempting to shake off the UNM label and branding themselves according to their ideologies and political positions, including because of fundamental disagreements with Saakashvili. However, the Georgian Dream’s strategy in all cases was to deny the party identity of these new political parties and brand them as a “collective UNM.” Even the parties that are highly critical of Saakashvili, such as European Georgia, Lelo, and For Georgia, are dubbed by the government as the “collective UNM.”

***Since violence feeds violence, the fear of reciprocity might be the major driver of Ivanishvili’s idée fixe to destroy political opponents.***

Political polarization, which Georgia’s friends often decry as an ultimate problem for Georgian democracy, is a direct outcome of Ivanishvili’s demonization approach. Since violence feeds violence, the fear of reciprocity might be the major driver of Ivanishvili’s idée fixe to destroy political opponents. Indeed, if he were to lose power to Saakashvili, the oligarch probably expects similar treatment – politically motivated cases, using preliminary detention for political reasons, and the politicized court making biased decisions.

## Using SUSI for Political Means

The State Security Service of Georgia (also known as the SSSG, or SUSI in Georgian) has become the major tool of political control for the Georgian Dream. SUSI is headed by a personal loyalist of Mr. Ivanishvili and it is believed that he is directly accountable to the oligarch. During recent years,

SUSI has been embroiled in a number of scandals, elucidating its influence on political processes and widespread surveillance operations over political opponents, the media, and civil society.

In 2021, a former security officer in Georgia allegedly [leaked](#) a massive cache of surveillance files detailing extensive spying on senior clergymen. The leaked documents, reportedly prepared for SUSI's Analytical Department, include information on the clergy's business activities, intimate relationships, sexual orientation, and alleged illegal drug use. Some directory titles in the files include "criminal [acts] and narcotics addiction," "threats," "lovers," and "bishops." The magnitude of the surveillance operation against the Church also provides a sneak peek into what sort of control SUSI has established on other important groups, mainly political opponents, civil society, and the mass media. The leaked files also showed that SUSI operatives were even listening to diplomatic corps representatives.

In 2022, two major watchdog groups, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and Transparency International Georgia (TI), [accused](#) the Georgian government of orchestrating large-scale electoral fraud during the 2018 presidential and 2020 parliamentary elections, citing leaked documents from former Deputy Director of the State Security Service, Soso Gogashvili, who was arrested in 2021. The groups alleged that the government has illegally offered pardons, pressured public employees, and misused administrative resources to influence election outcomes. The verified documents, dating from 2018 to 2019, reportedly show thousands of individuals receiving benefits in exchange for electoral support for the Georgian Dream. These benefits included canceling conditional sentences, early prison releases, and restoring driving licenses. The report also points to politically motivated terminations of public employees and the use of law enforcement to aid in campaign efforts. The investigation fur-

ther implicates the Revenue Service in politically influenced decisions on tax debt restructuring.

SUSI is known to have formal liaison persons in various ministries where they monitor which employees are politically loyal to the ruling party. During the May 2024 protests, when the employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Justice expressed their critical political views on social media, SUSI liaisons in the ministries made the case and pressured the ministers into firing or not continuing the contracts with the critically minded employees.

SUSI is also believed to be behind the violence and fear campaigns targeting opposition and civil society. An investigation by TV Formula has [revealed](#) that the Georgian State Security Service (SSG) allegedly organized and supervised an attack on Misha Mshvildadze, the station's co-founder and a prominent government critic. CCTV footage identified Giorgi Mumladze, an SSG investigator, as being involved in the attack with the operation reportedly overseen by his godfather, Levan Akhobadze, the deputy head of the SSG. TV Formula's investigation also linked Mumladze's father, a former employee of the Defense Ministry, to SUSI.

In April-June 2024, the planned night assaults on the opposition figures, as well as massive [abusive phoning](#) of the opposition and civil society representatives, is also highly likely to be linked with SUSI since no other organization can possess so much personal data, including the information on the live movement of the victims.

SUSI has been instrumental in upholding the narrative of the Georgian Dream that foreign powers, with local counterpart NGOs and political parties, are attempting to stage a coup d'état. This narrative has become an essential propaganda instrument of Ivanishvili's party, alleging that the West wants to overthrow the government and bring the UNM to power. In 2023, SUSI [accused](#) Giorgi Lort-

kipanidze, the deputy chief of Ukraine's military counterintelligence and former Georgian deputy Interior Minister, of plotting to overthrow the Georgian government by organizing mass unrest. The SSG claimed that Georgians fighting Russian forces in Ukraine, including a bodyguard of jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili and a member of his inner circle, are among the conspirators being trained near Ukraine's border with Poland.

The Georgian State Security Service (SSG) also [summoned](#) Serbian citizens linked to the organization Kanvas as part of an ongoing investigation into an alleged coup d'état. The SSG alleged that Kanvas, rooted in the Serbian organization Otpor, is training youth groups as part of the government overthrow scheme.

The major problem with SUSI has been its unlimited power and total lack of accountability. As the DRI [reported](#), the State Security Service enjoyed “total power and full control” over the various processes in the country. The leaked files also showed how [easily](#) SUSI can put someone's phone on surveillance. A simple message in a WhatsApp chat suffices.

## Manipulating the Electoral System

Thornike Gordadze [detailed](#) various strategies and tactics of pre-election manipulation by the Georgian Dream in the previous volume. Here, we will describe how the Georgian Dream manipulated the electoral system to increase its chances of staying in power.

One major instrument for state capture by the oligarch has been the effective manipulation of the electoral system. From 2012 to 2016, Georgia had a mixed proportional-majoritarian system, with 77 MPs entering Parliament through proportional lists and 73 through majoritarian districts. This

system heavily favored the ruling party since it allowed the selection of power-hungry local oligarchs and businessmen as majoritarian candidates who would finance their own campaigns and also contribute to party coffers. In 2014, when the Georgian Dream nearly lost the majority due to the split of the Free Democrats from the GD coalition, the UNM majoritarians switched sides and joined the Georgian Dream, safeguarding a political majority for Ivanishvili.

Talks about electoral reform began in 2014 when the opposition proposed switching to a regional-proportional system. However, after several rounds of consultations, the Georgian Dream declined the switch for the 2016 elections, and the opposition was not savvy enough to agree to the switch for the 2020 elections. Thus, the 2016 elections were held with the 77/73 system, which heavily benefited the Georgian Dream. Despite garnering 48.68% of the votes, the actual number of MPs they secured in Parliament was 115 out of 150, thus obtaining a constitutional majority.

Meanwhile, in 2018, the Georgian Dream passed constitutional changes that introduced a proportional electoral system from 2024 but made it impossible to create pre-election blocs, setting the electoral barrier at 5% to ensure that smaller political parties would not clear the barrier. Eventually, the equitable distribution of the “lost votes” was adopted, although, for a long period, the Georgian Dream insisted on the Mussolini-type solution, which would have given all lost votes to the first party.

The proposed electoral system, currently effective for the 2024 parliamentary elections, made it impossible for the opposition political parties, with close to a 5% political rating, to form pre-election blocs. Thus, the only way for these parties to unite is to form a new political party, sacrificing their identity, party colors, and electoral numbers. Moreover, according to new party financing rules,

only those parties that receive over 1% of support and enter Parliament receive funding from the state budget. Hence, for the opposition parties to coalesce, they must also sacrifice their finances. This system of disincentives is a significant reason why the opposition struggles to unite effectively today.

Following the 2019 political crisis, the Georgian Dream was forced to agree to the request of demonstrators and switch to proportional elections for the 2020 elections. However, realizing that party ratings did not provide for over 50% support, the Georgian Dream backtracked on its promise in late 2019. After a prolonged political crisis and negotiations, which included arrests of opposition leaders and large demonstrations in the center of Tbilisi, an agreement was finally reached to switch to the 120/30 system for the 2020 elections and a proportional system for the 2024 elections. The 120/30 system still allowed the Georgian Dream to have a bonus of 30 majoritarians. Despite numerous allegations of fraud, the outcome of the 2020 elections was largely determined by these 30 majoritarian MPs who contributed to another substantial majority of 85 MPs in the Parliament.

## Linking State and Party Budgets

In the 2012–2016 Parliament, Bidzina Ivanishvili effectively recruited most of the majoritarian MPs from the UNM, thus not only securing his majority in the Parliament and strengthening his grip on the regions. As [reported](#) by Transparency International, most of the GD majoritarian MP candidates in 2020 were actively using the state budget to benefit their companies. Companies with links to the GD majoritarians received GEL 4,364,109 through tenders and simplified procurement. Their companies also received state co-financing on a total investment of GEL 12,646,900. Moreover, the GD-affiliated majoritarians and their business partners also donated to the Georgian Dream over GEL 4.5 million from 2012 to 2020.

***The scheme of funneling the state budget to the Georgian Dream party coffers is very straightforward. In most cases, companies founded by or affiliated with GD politicians take part in the state tenders from which they skim the money and contribute it back to the party budget.***

The scheme of funneling the state budget to the Georgian Dream party coffers is very straightforward. In most cases, companies founded by or affiliated with GD politicians take part in the state tenders from which they skim the money and contribute it back to the party budget. For instance, the investigation of the Squander Detector found that in 2011–2020, GT Motors, a company linked to one of the senior GD politicians, received over GEL 56 million from the state budget, including through the no-bid tenders. The persons affiliated with this company, in turn, [contributed](#) over GEL 200,000 to the Georgian Dream. Also, in 2021, a company affiliated with one of the regional GD politicians [won](#) a state tender worth GEL 1.2 million. Unsurprisingly, the same politician contributed to the Georgian Dream campaigns with over GEL 100,000.

***Major businesses have been primary supporters of the Georgian Dream in the most critical political junctures.***

In addition to linking the major companies to the state budget and making them dependent on party favors, the Georgian Dream installed their loyalists in key business and financial positions. Irakli Rukhadze, the director of Imedi TV, also runs a major bank – Liberty Bank, which is the sole contractor of the state for dispersing pensions. Major businesses have been primary supporters of the Georgian Dream in the most critical political junctures. For instance, during the mass protest rallies

against the Georgian Dream and the law on foreign agents in 2024, large business representatives were asked to issue similar statements in support of the government, arguing that the “transparency” was good for the non-governmental sector.

## Partnering With the Church

The full picture of the Georgian Dream’s state capture would not be complete without the analysis of the partnership with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). As Ivanishvili and his party moved towards Far-Right rhetoric, support from the Patriarchy and the GOC became instrumental in their quest to remain in power.

From its early days in power, the Georgian Church and particularly numerous bishops actively supported the Georgian Dream, even using their weekly sermons to advocate for their support. This advocacy certainly had an impact on the 2012 elections. In return, the Church actively received state property for a symbolic price, which was also a practice during the UNM administration.

According to the [study](#) by the Social Justice Center, from 2014 to 2018, the government gifted the Patriarchy over 1.7 million sq. m of land for a symbolic price. In return, the clergy attended almost every single GD party event, including the nomination of the majoritarian candidates in the run-up to the 2020 elections.

Moreover, the intertwining of the state and the Church before the elections became obvious in the run-up to the 2020 parliamentary elections when the issue of the David Garedji monastery was raised as the major pre-election topic. According to the narrative of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Dream, part of an important place within the Garedji complex, which lies on the border with Azerbaijan, was treacherously given up to Baku by former government representa-

tives. “Garedji is Georgia” became a motto during the 2020 elections, advocated both by the Church and the government.

A similar symbiosis is also visible in 2024. The introduction of the package of laws, dubbed “anti-LGBT” laws but also known as the “family purity laws,” is supported by the clergy and the Patriarch. It appears that one of the strategies of the government will be to run on the anti-minority platform which would be music to the ears of an extremely conservative Church that enjoys deep ties with the Russian Orthodox Church.

## Sowing Nihilism and Fear

Oligarchic rules thrive when the population is desperate, nihilism persists, and no immediate solutions are visible. The demonization of political opponents, the attack on NGOs and the free media, the total control of the courts, and the manipulation of elections leave many Georgians wondering whether or not their efforts to contribute to the democratization of the country are worth it, especially considering how easy it is to emigrate, legally or illegally, to the EU or the US.

***For the state capture to be fully cooked, this nihilism is an essential ingredient.***

For the state capture to be fully cooked, this nihilism is an essential ingredient. There were fewer dissenters in the country and fewer threats to the oligarchic power. The case of Belarus in 2020 shows that Lukashenko gladly allowed the disgruntled middle class to leave the country after heavily cracking down on them. After all, if you dislike the government and are in a different country, there is not much you can do to challenge the state capturer’s power.

Georgia seems to be on the same track. If the oligarch manages to stay in power after October

2024, the state capture will be complete, and many Georgians will have to decide whether or not to

stay in the authoritarian state or seek a better future elsewhere ■

# Redressing the Accountability Deficit

## The International Logic of “Rustaveli Avenue Politics”

**G**eorgia watchers have gotten used to seeing Tbilisians fill the streets of their capital whenever political passions boil over – which happens regularly. In the past two years, the images of Georgians marching with European flags became a staple of the international press, giving the protests a foreign policy dimension. The ruling Georgian Dream party added a dash of conspiracy, accusing foreign donors of fomenting the regime change. But why did Rustaveli Avenue, a central Tbilisi thoroughfare in front of the Parliament, become a totem site for the Georgian people’s democracy? While some left-wing analysts see the subversive hand of international capitalism, this phenomenon may have to do more with the internally deficient institutional quality of Georgian democracy.

### Win Big – Lose Big

Ever since regaining its independence in 1990, Georgia’s political life has been a predictable roller-coaster: political coalitions gained massive majorities in elections, only to decay and be dethroned in a more or less dramatic fashion.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s Round Table coalition was first to come to power in 1990. Only months later, it fell apart and went literally up in flames as a civil war ravaged the country. A rag-tag coalition of politicians and warlords that emerged was only subdued by former Soviet strongman Eduard Shevardnadze in 1995 to give way to the Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG). After having governed for over eight years of increasing stability but corruption and institutional decay, the CUG was pushed



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out of power in 2003 after rigged elections. The United National Movement of Mikheil Saakashvili took up its place and redressed the governance but flailed on human rights and was dethroned in 2012 – this time through elections – by the Georgian Dream, which is facing perhaps its greatest electoral challenge this year in 2024 after having governed for a record 12 years.

All those political groupings came to power as alliances or blocs of various parties. All were led by a strongman who served as an operational head and a symbol of the movement. All but the Georgian Dream swept to power with a quasi-unanimous popular vote. Gamsakhurdia/Round Table garnered 88% in 1991, Shevardnadze was supported by 97.9% in 1992, and Saakashvili received 96,9% in 2004. The Georgian Dream received 54.9% in 2012, but this support was converted into the absolute

majority of seats, which later translated into the constitutional majority in 2016, despite only receiving 48%. While in power, all the coalitions fragmented and eventually fell apart, opening the way to an increasingly authoritarian rule shaped around the idea of loyalty to the strongman.

The periodic public mobilization occurred against the sitting governments. In many cases such mobilizations were in the name of improving democratic institutions, against corruption, or to claim civic and political rights. To counter that pressure, the governments engaged in counter-protest mobilization of their own supporters. Some of that took place under conservative, anti-democratic, or populist banners. These pressures have contributed to the eventual unseating of the ruling parties. So, what is the political rationale behind this dynamic?

## Crises of Accountability

Georgia's democracy has been imperfect, struggling to redress itself sufficiently to carry the weight of governance and ensure alternatives. V-Dem Democracy [Reports](#), the most comprehensive and multi-dimensional evaluation of the state of democracy, have classified Georgia as an "electoral autocracy" from 1991 to 2003, as a "democratic gray zone" in 2004-2007, followed by two years of an "autocratic gray zone" in 2008-2009 and back to a "democratic gray zone" in 2010-2012. After the electoral transition of power in that year, it was classed as an "electoral democracy" until 2023. The Economic Intelligence Unit's [Democracy Index](#), which reports data from 2006, considered Georgia a "hybrid regime" for the whole period since that year, almost breaking into "flawed democracies" in 2016-2017. Some of these weaknesses are systemic.

***The winner-takes-it-all mentality and practice is one key flaw. Almost all victors got to power with overwhelming majorities.***

The winner-takes-it-all mentality and practice is one key flaw. Almost all victors got to power with overwhelming majorities. Almost all who lost, disappeared from the scene. So once in power, the parties occupy all branches of government and build institutional obstacles to prevent their potential adversaries from gaining a foothold through elections.

The mixed, proportional/majoritarian system of elections and the relatively high election threshold always gave the ruling parties an unfair advantage. They recuperated all votes cast under the threshold and almost all majoritarian seats through the use of administrative levers. Thus, even while the ruling parties no longer garnered majority voter support, they still commanded a parliamentary majority.

Georgia has had a serious, persistent problem with political accountability. The distortion of the election system undermined "vertical accountability"—that of the elected representatives to the voters. Simultaneously, the ruling party's control over various branches of government and its subjugation of civil service sapped "horizontal accountability"—the checks and balances between the different branches of government.

The only avenue left to communicate the shifting public mood to the authorities was so-called "diagonal accountability;" that is, all the means by which citizens make their voices heard to influence politics directly – associations, professional unions, and other civil society actors that engage in advocacy, lobbying, and pressure, through rallies, demonstrations, sit-ins and other forms of protest.

***Thus, we can consider "Rustaveli Avenue politics"—recurring large protests to voice discontent and achieve change—as a way in which Georgians have sought accountability for their representatives when no other institution was fully capable or willing to do so and/or when significant segments of the population felt that the results of the elections did not adequately reflect public opinion.***

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## From Sovereignty Claims to Legitimacy Challenges

Georgian protests have evolved over time from identitarian and independence rallies to legitimacy challenges and then complemented by recent “way-of-life” protests. Early modern mass protests included the identitarian/independence protests against Stalin’s ideological dethronement in 1956 and the 1978 protests to maintain Georgian as a state language. These events, occurring during the Soviet occupation, laid the groundwork for modern political movements. The 1988-1989 mass rallies by emerging political parties sought independence, culminating in the tragic Soviet Army [crackdown](#) on 9 April 1989, which propelled Gamsakhurdia’s Round Table coalition to power in the 1990 elections.

Following independence in 1990, protests often challenged the electoral legitimacy of authorities. The first major challenge to President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, emanating from the parties around the so-called National Congress that questioned the Round Table’s accession to power through the Soviet Constitution - occurred on 2 September 1991, escalating rapidly into an armed coup and civil war. The Military Council, later the State Council headed by Eduard Shevardnadze, came to power after the coup and thus faced an inherent legitimacy crisis. A large rally of its opponents on 24 September 1992 was met with armed violence. Persistent civic disobedience and armed resistance continued until 1995.

Shevardnadze’s newly created Citizens’ Union of Georgia (CUG) won the 1995 elections, bringing relative stability amid endemic corruption and economic decay. Within the CUG, reformist and conservative factions emerged, briefly creating a more functional horizontal accountability system bolstered by civil society organizations. However, by the late 1990s, public discontent grew due to state failures in security and economy. The 1999

elections, held with a 7% threshold, did not reflect the shift in public mood. The “diagonal” protests came back: in 2001, large protests started after an opposition TV station was shut down for investigating police corruption, which led to a decisive split within the CUG.

The 2003 Parliamentary elections, perceived as rigged, led to the Rose Revolution, during which Shevardnadze resigned and the United National Movement (UNM) took power. The UNM’s anti-corruption reforms triggered early interest group protests from the “losers of reforms,” such as the 2004 [Wrestlers’ Riot](#). As the UNM shed its erstwhile coalition partners and consolidated power, the demand for more horizontal accountability led to the 2007 crisis with police crackdowns on opposition protests.

Despite temporary unity during the 2008 Russian invasion, opposition to the UNM continued, peaking with the 2009 “City of Tents” protest, which paralyzed the capital for months. The 2012 [campaign rally](#) by the Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia (GDDG), an embodiment of the electoral [challenge](#) by Bidzina Ivanishvili, drew on a groundswell of demand for CUG accountability and paved the way for the GDDG’s election victory in 2012. However, the initial enthusiasm for an [orderly power transfer](#) faded as the GDDG’s rule became more authoritarian, bolstered by oligarchic financial muscle.

## Way of Life

Most protests in Georgia up to the last decade have centered on legitimacy [challenges](#), particularly after elections where the opposition sought to unseat the ruling party. While the Georgian Dream (GD) party faced such political challenges, especially from the United National Movement, it effectively discredited the UNM and succeeded in framing all opposition as disguised UNM factions.

***The gradual oligarchic capture of government branches, independent institutions, and media significantly reduced the political opposition's ability to ensure horizontal accountability.***

The gradual oligarchic capture of government branches, independent institutions, and media significantly reduced the political opposition's ability to ensure horizontal accountability. However, demands for diagonal accountability persisted, manifesting as “outrage protests” against government corruption and inefficiency, such as the [2018 protests](#) over the mishandling of a high-profile teenage murder investigation and the [2017 riots](#) after a deadly fire in a seaside town.

***Another significant form has emerged – the “way-of-life protests” where citizens defended their lifestyle choices, either advocating for more civic rights or opposing liberal democracy.***

Another significant form has emerged – the “way-of-life protests” where citizens defended their lifestyle choices, either advocating for more civic rights or opposing liberal democracy. The White Noise Movement (2015–2018) was a notable “way of life” [protest](#) against stringent drug policies and the government clampdown on popular nightclubs, mobilizing an otherwise politically passive youth. Several Tbilisi Pride events throughout the years – however, limited in their scale and success, were also going in this direction.

A major convergence of this legitimacy challenge with the liberal “way of life” protests occurred on 20 June 2019 when protests erupted after Russian Communist MP Sergei Gavrilov was invited to speak in the Georgian Parliament. The violent police [crackdown](#) resulted in severe injuries and arrests, leading to the Parliament Speaker's resigna-

tion and [promises](#) to reform the electoral system and ensure better representation of the popular will – which never materialized.

However, the illiberal counter-mobilization, sanctioned and [abetted](#) by the government did materialize. In 2021, conservative hate groups [attacked](#) the gay community and journalists, with police failing to react – marking a stark contrast to the crackdown on liberal protests.

***The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 accentuated the growing geopolitical aspect of the divide between Georgia's civic movements and the increasingly nativist GD government, which chose the path of accommodation with aggressive Russia.***

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 accentuated the growing geopolitical aspect of the divide between Georgia's civic movements and the increasingly nativist GD government, which chose the path of accommodation with aggressive Russia. Massive pro-European rallies were held in support of EU candidacy talks and [demanded](#) a politically neutral government.

***Georgia's democratic and European future remains uncertain as it approaches the October 2024 elections.***

The government's backlash against civil society became systemic and culminated in proposing a law branding Western-funded groups as “foreign agents,” akin to Russian and Hungarian legislation. Initially [withdrawn](#) in 2023 due to protests, it was reintroduced and [passed](#) in 2024 amid significant opposition and international condemnation. Georgia's democratic and European future remains uncertain as it approaches the October 2024 elections.

## Distortion is Not Where You Think It Is

Propaganda voices from Russia, domestically, but also from some quarters of the European hard left, have argued that the Western choice is being imposed on Georgia from outside and that, significantly, civil society actors, often working with Western funding, are [distorting](#) the political scene. But the distortion, as we have seen, lies elsewhere.

***Georgia's decision not to live in the authoritarian Soviet state was made more than three decades ago. But the journey through authoritarianism, the political trauma of civil war, and economic upheaval left the political system with the key distortion that has dampened the democratic transition - namely, the lack of vertical and horizontal accountability.***

Georgia's decision not to live in the authoritarian Soviet state was made more than three decades ago. But the journey through authoritarianism, the political trauma of civil war, and economic upheaval left the political system with the key dis-

tortion that has dampened the democratic transition - namely, the lack of vertical and horizontal accountability. An active civil society and public mobilization have helped to compensate for this problem rather than exacerbate it, although not all civic movements were and are pro-democratic or liberal. Moreover, the current regime has instrumentalized the illiberal counter-mobilization of civic groups to counteract the compensatory effect of civil society activism.

The protests in Georgia in 2019 and beyond are a symptom of the refusal of large segments of the population to live in a closed society. The European flags flying on Rustaveli Avenue are not a sign of foreign policy naivety; Georgians do not believe that Brussels will magically take care of their problems. The European flag flying in Tbilisi is a "republican" banner, a symbol of the choice of the European ideal based on human rights, solidarity, and peaceful coexistence.

The European response to the Georgian crisis should be calibrated with this aspiration in mind: fixing Georgia's politics means solving the fundamental problem of accountability, which requires an environment where constitutional discussion is possible without the key distortion - the overbearing influence of oligarchic capital that has captured the institutions ■

# Georgia's Role in the Western Resilience Against the Authoritarian Axis

**T**he current political climate in Georgia is marked by the ruling Georgian Dream party's increasing alignment with Russia, Iran, and China, alongside escalating authoritarian measures against local dissent. This shift has alienated Western allies, diminishing the EU and the US's influence over the Georgian Dream. The West's remaining options include imposing sanctions and bolstering pro-democracy forces within Georgia. In the given status quo, three potential outcomes could be seen as most probable: (1) under the mounting wave of repressions, the regime successfully imposes authoritarian laws, pushing Georgia towards a Belarus-like state; (2) the regime's repression leads to civil unrest and eventual Russian intervention, akin to the Maidan scenario and (3) under strategic US pressure and the threat of sanctions, the Georgian Dream agrees to hold free and fair elections.

***The trajectory that develops in Georgia in the longer term will depend mainly on regional geopolitics, particularly the dynamics of the war in Ukraine.***

Although the most favorable, the third scenario is also the least likely due to global geopolitical instability and US internal politics. The trajectory that develops in Georgia in the longer term will depend mainly on regional geopolitics, particularly the dynamics of the war in Ukraine. However, in the six months leading up to the milestone elections in Georgia in October 2024, the developments in the country could significantly impact the broader authoritarian push against the rules-based international system. Therefore, active support and decisive action from Georgia's allies in the US is as urgent as ever. It is crucial to elevate the issue on the political agenda to prevent the first two dire outcomes.



**SHOTA GVINERIA**  
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## Current State of Affairs

The current situation in Georgia is a reflection of regional and global processes. Authoritarian regimes, within the framework of their aggressive revisionist policies, are attempting to dismantle free and democratic values and the rules-based international system. Warfare waged by Belarus and Russia against their own people and neighbors is a clear illustration of this. Unfortunately, Georgia has found itself on the wrong side of this battle. Today, Georgia, along with Russia and Belarus, is a country where the government openly opposes Western political models and values. Not long ago, the Georgian Dream discussed integration into NATO and the European Union. Still, even then, it was clear that the Georgian Dream's political system was incompatible with European values and the declared goal of integration into Western institutions. The epistolary messages voiced by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the chairman of the Georgian Dream, in April 2024 were heard loud and clear in Moscow that the ruling party has formally abandoned its Western orientation and stepped into an authoritarian path.

**Today, Georgia, along with Russia and Belarus, is a country where the government openly opposes Western political models and values.**

Today, even Georgia's closest strategic partners have questions about what is happening in the country. Do the majority of citizens approve of living in the kind of state that Georgia currently is? Where do they stand in the battle between authoritarianism and democracy? How is it possible that a nation that predominantly supports European and Euro-Atlantic integration is governed by an openly anti-Western power?

**Clearly, the path chosen by the government is not Western-oriented but aimed at creating a state similar to those of Lukashenko and Putin.**

In functioning democracies, fundamental questions are answered through free and fair elections, but today, Georgian society is deprived of that opportunity. Due to the absence of an independent judiciary, the lack of accountable law enforcement agencies, and a fair electoral system, the entire administrative resource serves the interests of the ruling power, not the national interests. Georgia's strategic partners have repeatedly [noted](#) that the line between the state and the ruling party has been erased. Especially after adopting the Russian-style law on foreign influence, it has become clear that it is nearly impossible to hold free and fair elections in present-day Georgia. Consequently, Georgia today is a Russian-type captured state, incapable of taking steps toward European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Clearly, the path chosen by the government is not Western-oriented but aimed at creating a state similar to those of Lukashenko and Putin. The adoption and enforcement of the "Russian law" is merely a formal confirmation and an attempt at the de jure legitimation of this reality.

## Accelerated Authoritarianism and West-less-ness

Even a short-term chronology of the Georgian Dream's actions in April-June 2024 shows an apparent drift away from the West and an alignment with authoritarian regimes. First, the parliament adopted a family of laws (the Russian-style law of foreign influences, the offshore law, and the anti-LGBT law) that significantly strengthened authoritarian tools for oppressing various segments of Georgian society and improved the regime's corrupt money laundering patterns.



Second, the ruling regime has fully aligned its mainstream narratives with Russia, [declaring](#) the entire West a “global war party” and [accusing](#) a senior EU representative of making murder threats. Third, the Georgian dream signaled an alignment with another authoritarian regime by demonstratively [attending](#) the Iranian President’s funeral, upsetting Georgia’s key strategic partners - the US and Israel. Finally, by [handing](#) over the most important strategic asset – the Anaklia port project - to Chinese entities sanctioned by the US, the Georgian Dream rubber-stamped the formalization of its foreign policy shift. The concert of those actions damaged relations with Georgia’s key strategic partner and ally, the United States, to the point where top officials faced sanctions, and the Secretary of State announced a [reassessment](#) of the relations, instead earning significant [praise](#) from Moscow.

Another critical question is why the Georgian Dream accelerated the *de jure* shift in foreign policy right before the 26 October parliamentary elections. Political dynamics in Georgia and the poor performance of the country’s fragmented opposition indicated that everything was going well for the Georgian Dream, and they should not have had a problem winning the elections. Accordingly, there was no need to strengthen authoritarian tools for winning elections.

***It seems that Russia demanded concrete actions from the oligarch to prove his reliability and loyalty by ‘improving’ his earlier mistake of not being able to jeopardize the EU candidate status.***

Thus, the accelerated enforcement of such an evidently controversial trajectory seemed only logical after securing victory in the elections. Looking back at how hard the Georgian Dream tried to [sabotage](#) the EU candidate status, the only rational explanation of ‘why now?’ can be clandestine

pressure from Russia to immediately disengage Ivanishvili from the EU integration process. It seems that Russia demanded concrete actions from the oligarch to prove his reliability and loyalty by ‘improving’ his earlier mistake of not being able to jeopardize the EU candidate status. Moreover, the current policy of the Georgian Dream puts all achievements made on the path to European integration at risk. Georgia’s declared foreign policy U-turn is, thus, the shortest and surest way to achieve Russia’s ultimate goal – maintaining Georgia firmly within its sphere of influence and blocking its path toward the EU and NATO.

De jure change in foreign policy before the elections is also of principal importance for Ivanishvili. For the Georgian Dream, these will be the first elections in which the party runs an openly anti-Western campaign. If the Georgian Dream wins on this platform, Bidzina Ivanishvili will have achieved the legitimization of a new social contract similar to the one that Lukashenko had before the 2021 presidential elections in Belarus, where, in exchange for nominal ‘peace and stability,’ society must give up its freedoms and liberties.

## Russian Threat – Boogeyman for Power Retention

***Georgian Dream has entrenched a binary view of society: those who support the party are considered legitimate citizens. Those who oppose are deemed enemies of the state.***

The governance model adopted by the Georgian Dream, with influences from its new authoritarian allies, relies on tactics of violence, intimidation, and terror. This approach exacerbates societal divisions and polarization, making governance through democratic means increasingly untenable. By fostering an atmosphere of fear and divi-

sion, the Georgian Dream has entrenched a binary view of society: those who support the party are considered legitimate citizens. Those who oppose are deemed enemies of the state. This divisive strategy has eroded the fabric of Georgian society and debilitated the functioning of even the fundamental democratic principles. The government's actions, including adopting laws that suppress civil liberties and aligning with Russian interests, only deepen this divide and undermine any potential for reconciliation.

***The Maidan-like scenario serves as a potent threat to dissuade voters from seeking change, effectively suggesting that the threat of Russian aggression is a reason to keep the Georgian Dream in power.***

In Georgia's volatile political landscape, both Russia and the Georgian Dream have consistently forewarned about the consequences of the regime losing power. They [warn](#) that such an outcome would plunge the country into chaos, drawing parallels to the Maidan protests in Ukraine, which led to significant upheaval and eventually Russian military intervention. The Maidan-like scenario serves as a potent threat to dissuade voters from seeking change, effectively suggesting that the threat of Russian aggression is a reason to keep the Georgian Dream in power.

The strategic narrative [propagated](#) by both Russia and the Georgian Dream emphasizes the potential for chaos and destabilization, creating a perception that only the current ruling party can maintain peace and stability. This fearmongering is designed to intimidate the electorate, portraying opposition movements as harbingers of instability and violence. Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's [remark](#) stressing that the Maidan revolution would not be allowed in Georgia is a part of this coordinated messaging strategy, which aims

to paint a dire picture of what might happen if the opposition gains power.

Furthermore, the [influx](#) of Russians into Georgia in recent years adds another layer of complexity. The presence of a significant Russian population could be manipulated to justify Russian intervention under the guise of protecting their rights. This scenario is not just theoretical and presents a danger that could be triggered if the Georgian Dream's grip on power is threatened.

The strategy of leveraging the threat of Russian aggression to maintain power creates a perilous situation. In fact, if the Georgian Dream continues to erode democratic institutions and distance the country from its strategic partners, the likelihood of destabilization and conflict increases. This policy of aligning with Russia and adopting its authoritarian tactics undermines Georgia's sovereignty and democratic aspirations, posing a significant risk to both the country and the broader region. The use of the threat of Russian aggression as a political tool by the Georgian Dream is a dangerous gambit that could lead to the destruction of democracy and cause destabilization in Georgia.

## Potential Consequences for the West

The implications of the Georgian Dream's policies extend far beyond Georgia's borders, posing significant risks to Western interests and regional stability. The adoption of the "Russian law" on the "transparency of foreign influence" marks a critical juncture, signaling a deliberate turn away from democratic norms and Western alliances. If Georgia continues on this path, it could become a satellite state firmly within Russia's sphere of influence, undermining decades of Western efforts to promote democracy and stability in the region. Georgia's Belarusization will undermine Western interests in the wider region.

## ***Georgia's Belarusization will undermine Western interests in the wider region.***

One of the most immediate consequences would be the erosion of democratic governance. This shift not only threatens to dismantle the progress made in building democratic institutions but also poses a direct challenge to the rules-based international order that the West strives to uphold. Georgia's alignment with authoritarian regimes like Russia, Iran, and China would create new possibilities for autocratic regimes to bypass sanctions, money laundering, and illicit trade and transportation routes to support their aggressive agendas. This will immediately strengthen the war efforts of those countries in Ukraine and the Middle East, dramatically dominating Western interests and influence in those critical regions.

Moreover, the geopolitical ramifications are profound. Georgia's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia makes it a critical player in regional security dynamics. Its drift towards Russia could compromise the West's ability to counterbalance Russian influence in the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus. This could lead to increased instability, affecting NATO's eastern flank and potentially closing off critical east-west routes and middle corridors between Russia and Iran, precisely like the Suwalki Corridor, vital for connecting the Baltic States to the rest of NATO.

## **Potential Consequences for Georgia**

A continuation of the current course will have severe and far-reaching consequences for Georgia. The most immediate impact will be the loss of critical support from Western allies, particularly the United States, which has been instrumental in providing financial aid, military training, and

intelligence support. American high officials have already stated that such "sanctions" are underway. Without this assistance, Georgia's defense capabilities could be significantly weakened, making it more vulnerable to external threats, especially from Russia. If the Europeans follow suit, as suggested by various EU leaders after the EU Foreign Affairs Council on 24 June, Georgia will remain without the essential military and state-building support.

## ***Georgia's disengagement from strategic partnerships with the West will further increase the risk of Russian military intervention.***

The prospect of re-integrating Abkhazia and South Ossetia, regions currently under Russian control, would become even more remote. The Georgian Dream's alignment with Russia nullifies any realistic chance of negotiating the return of these territories under Georgian sovereignty. Georgia, being aligned with Russia, will not be able to benefit even if Russia fails in Ukraine and will have to give away its occupied territories. Moreover, Georgia's disengagement from strategic partnerships with the West will further increase the risk of Russian military intervention, especially if the Georgian government continues to dismantle democratic institutions and suppress civil society. This could increase instability and potential conflict, further undermining Georgia's security and independence.

The reassessment of Georgia's strategic partnership with the United States carries severe implications for the country's defense capabilities. This reassessment will likely result in a complete halt of financial assistance from the US. However, the more critical impact will be the loss of access to essential military education, training, and equipment that have been the cornerstone of the development of the Georgian Armed Forces for decades.

Since Georgia gained independence, the US has been a crucial partner in developing its military capabilities. American financial aid, military training programs, and advanced equipment have transformed the Georgian Armed Forces into a more professional and capable entity. The US has provided comprehensive training programs encompassing combat tactics, strategic planning, logistics, and leadership development. These programs have been vital in ensuring that the Georgian military operates effectively and adheres to the standards of modern armed forces.

The education and training provided by the US have played a pivotal role in building a cadre of highly skilled officers and soldiers who can operate sophisticated equipment and execute complex military strategies. Losing access to these resources would significantly degrade the operational capabilities of the Georgian military. The sophisticated equipment supplied by the US, coupled with the technical training to use and maintain it, has been integral to Georgia's defense posture. Without ongoing support and the ability to procure and learn new technologies, the Georgian Armed Forces would face a steep decline in operational readiness and effectiveness.

Attempting to substitute US support with assistance from Georgia's new authoritarian allies, such as Russia, Iran, and China, is not a viable solution. These countries are not interested in developing Georgia's defense capabilities. Their support, if

any, would likely gear more towards establishing control over Georgia's defense sector rather than genuinely enhancing its military strength. Thus, the reassessment of Georgia's strategic partnership with the US, driven by the policies of the Georgian Dream, poses a significant threat to the country's defense capabilities, making Georgia even more vulnerable to external threats.

***The erosion of democratic institutions and the pivot away from Western alliances could lead to regional instability, weakening the rules-based international order.***

The current trajectory of the Georgian Dream government, marked by increased authoritarianism and alignment with Russia, poses a significant threat to both Georgia and the broader international community. The erosion of democratic institutions and the pivot away from Western alliances could lead to regional instability, weakening the rules-based international order. This path threatens the country's sovereignty, security, and democratic aspirations, potentially leaving the country isolated and vulnerable. It is imperative for Georgia's allies, particularly in the US, to actively support the nation's democratic forces and counter the authoritarian tide, ensuring that Georgia remains a sovereign, democratic state aligned with the principles of freedom and the rule of law ■

# Sanctions Must Awaken the Georgian Public, Not the Government

**W**hen authoritarian leaders face sanctions, they often project a facade of resilience, claiming that the penalties do not affect them. Leaders from countries like Iran, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and Russia usually assert that sanctions validate their policies and frame the West as an adversary attacking their rightful governance. This propaganda, whether from Kim in North Korea or Putin in Russia, consistently portrays the global West as an entity attempting to destroy their states, with sanctions serving as evidence of such attempts.

***In Georgia, leaders of the ruling Georgian Dream party make similarly bold declarations, dismissing fears of sanctions.***

In Georgia, leaders of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party make similarly bold declarations, dis-

missing fears of sanctions. Their rhetoric mirrors that of North Korea and Venezuela, blaming American imperialism and, in the case of the Georgian Dream, the “Global War Party” for trying to embroil Georgia in a conflict with Russia.

Across all of these regimes, presenting a brave front in the face of sanctions is standard practice. Recently, the GD parliamentary majority leader even sang the reworded Georgian Football National Team chant - “We are not afraid of sanctions.” Such dismissals highlight local resistance and heroism but consistently overlook the significant long-term damage that sanctions can impose on a nation’s economy and political landscape. Ultimately, these regimes prioritize maintaining and strengthening their grip on power, which remains the most crucial goal for authoritarian leaders.

The Georgian Dream has suffered a significant defeat on the international stage, losing its partners’ support and international legitimacy. However, it



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still has the potential to secure the more critical internal power struggle. If sanctions against the Georgian Dream are not timely, public, well-targeted, and serious, ineffective and haphazard measures may allow the party to portray its international isolation as a success through its propaganda and disinformation machinery. The West must be cautious of this.

***If sanctions against the Georgian Dream are not timely, public, well-targeted, and serious, ineffective and haphazard measures may allow the party to portray its international isolation as a success through its propaganda and disinformation machinery.***

Western states and institutions considering sanctions on Georgia should first ask: Who exactly

should these sanctions aim to awaken? Should they target the Georgian government to change its policies or the Georgian people to change their government in the upcoming elections? Our stance is that sanctions should primarily aim to alert the Georgian people rather than attempting to change the nature of the oligarchic regime, as the latter is an unrealistic goal.

## Visa Bans as “First Tranche”

The US is the first nation to sanction the Georgian government after the adoption of the foreign agents bill, with the State Department announcing the “first tranche” of sanctions on June 6, 2024. These sanctions target members of the Georgian Dream party, parliament, law enforcement, and private citizens involved in anti-democratic activities such as undermining peaceful assembly, attacking protesters, intimidating civil society, and spreading disinformation.

Under the [Immigration and Nationality Act](#) Section 211 A 3C, the US visa restrictions aim to punish those responsible for Georgia's anti-democratic turn. Although the US State Department [indicated](#) that several dozen individuals are subject to these visa bans, their identities cannot be made public due to personal information protections.

***Such secrecy undermines the effectiveness of the visa bans. Learning about how concrete leaders are blacklisted by the US can be fundamental in shaping the public perceptions of Georgians towards their authoritarian leaders.***

Such secrecy undermines the effectiveness of the visa bans. Learning about how concrete leaders are blacklisted by the US can be fundamental in shaping the public perceptions of Georgians towards their authoritarian leaders. Guessing who is blacklisted and who is not is fun only for a few days, while government propaganda can very quickly downplay the significance of the unpublicized bans.

The visa bans are particularly impactful as they prevent sanctioned individuals from entering the US and can also affect their family members. For example, if Georgian Dream party Chairman Irakli Gharibashvili and his family were sanctioned, his son studying in the US might have to suspend his education. However, in Georgia's case, the identities of those affected by the visa restrictions remain unknown, and the ruling party's defensive propaganda quickly dismisses local media speculations.

The general response from the ruling party is a denial of receiving any notification and an assertion that they have no plans to travel to the US. To demonstrate their purported unaffected status, the head of the State Intelligence Service even un-

dertook a working visit to Washington, DC, in late June. The opposition, crying wolf about sanctions for too long, has little choice but to guess the list of sanctioned individuals by examining the appearance of the Government representatives at the US embassy events, assuming that sanctioned ones won't be invited.

Therefore, it seems that the U.S. administration's visa ban-oriented "sanctions lite" are not only "too little, too late" but also counterproductive. The vague and mysterious travel ban has become a laughing stock among the ruling elite, who feel emboldened and more powerful than ever to withstand pressure even from the superpower 'for the sake of the national interests.'

While the issue with the American visa bans lies in their non-publicized nature, the EU is not even considering such measures. The primary reason is the lack of consensus among EU member states to blacklist Georgian anti-democratic forces. The main obstacle [appears](#) to be the current EU presidency held by Hungary, which has long positioned itself as a close ally of Georgia's ultra-right-leaning, anti-democratic government. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán even briefly [attended](#) a reception hosted by Georgia's Prime Minister in Berlin during Euro 2024, mainly to showcase that the Georgian government was still welcome in Europe and that no sanctions were in place.

***Theoretically, individual EU member states could blacklist specific individuals they consider instrumental in undermining Georgian democracy.***

Theoretically, individual EU member states could blacklist specific individuals they consider instrumental in undermining Georgian democracy. For example, the Baltic states imposed personal sanctions on Belarusian politicians following the 2020 political crisis and the crackdown on protesters.

In 2020, the Baltic States unilaterally [sanctioned](#) 30 Belarusian politicians and then [added](#) another 118 individuals to the list in 2021, ultimately black-listing several hundred Belarusian officials and law enforcers. Other EU states only later followed the lead of the Baltic states. In Georgia's case, however, EU states are refraining from a similar approach, fearing it might backfire. Given the lack of EU consensus on sanctioning anti-democratic politicians in Georgia, a unilateral policy by individual states might be the only practical approach.

## Painful Financial Sanctions, but Not Now

The US is also considering asset freezes and financial sanctions as outlined in the [proposed](#) MEGOBARI Act (Mobilizing and Enhancing Georgia's Options for Building Accountability, Resilience, and Independence Act) introduced by US Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) in May 2024.

If enacted, the US Secretary of State, in coordination with relevant US government agencies, will have 60 days to identify key Georgian government officials responsible for undermining democracy, human rights, or security in Georgia. This includes agents or those significantly influencing government actions. Sanctions may be applied under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and the anti-kleptocracy and human rights sanctions of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, thereby targeting the Georgian leadership with financial sanctions. Additionally, visa bans will also be imposed on these individuals and their families.

Financial restrictions would further isolate sanctioned individuals from the global financial system, barring them from using major payment systems like Visa and Mastercard and severely limiting their banking transactions, even within Georgia. This was previously demonstrated when [sanctions](#)

against former prosecutor Otar Partskhaladze resulted in his exclusion from banking services.

***If the US were to calibrate the adoption of these acts in September and early October, public awareness of the concrete punitive measures would increase to the maximum, and the chances of GD propaganda downplaying the importance of these acts would be minimized.***

While financial sanctions would be the most painful for those targeted, their implementation is not imminent and is unlikely before the October parliamentary elections. First, the MEGOBARI Act must pass through Congress, which might take a few months. Similarly, the Senate is [considering](#) the Georgia People's Act, which might later be reconciled with the MEGOBARI Act. This could also be time-consuming. Federal agencies will only get involved after the legislative framework is set, receiving the green light to pursue financial and other serious sanctions. Before that, any discussion of severe financial implications for the Georgian leadership will be met with mockery and rebuttal. However, if the US were to calibrate the adoption of these acts in September and early October, public awareness of the concrete punitive measures would increase to the maximum, and the chances of GD propaganda downplaying the importance of these acts would be minimized.

While the US is at least considering financial sanctions, the EU is not even close to such a decision. The main obstacle is the absence of a legal mechanism to blacklist Georgian Dream MPs or human rights-abusing law enforcers. The most straightforward mechanism for the EU would be to act if individuals in a particular country facilitate the circumvention of sanctions imposed on Russia after its aggression against Ukraine. However, few



cases prove that the Georgian government is responsible for allowing the circumvention of sanctions. Regarding financial sanctions due to human rights violations, the EU has recently become very cautious due to a number of legal challenges it received through the European Court of Justice.

Certainly, the EU could adopt a special framework for targeted restrictive measures that undermine democracy in Georgia. A similar framework was established for Moldova in 2023 when the EU created, at the request of Chisinau, a framework for targeted restrictive measures against those undermining the sovereignty, independence, democracy, rule of law, stability, or security of the Republic of Moldova. For a similar framework to be applied to Georgia, ideally, the request should come from Tbilisi, which is unlikely, but more importantly, adopting the framework would require consensus in Brussels, which is currently lacking because of Budapest's position.

Therefore, the problem with the most efficient sanction instrument – financial sanctions – is that it is not yet tangible. And the more intangible a threat, as every authoritarian regime knows, the less likely it will affect the regime's grip on power.

## Sticks-and-Carrots of Overviewing Bilateral Relations

Both the EU and the US are considering how to influence the policies of the Georgian Dream by contrasting the potential negative and positive outcomes for Georgia. They aim to paint a bleak strategic picture if the GD continues its anti-democratic policies and a promising one if it changes its course.

The messaging of this sticks-and-carrots policy is misleading. The West should make it clear that the carrots will be gone with the Georgian Dream in power. This should also come with the strategic

message about the need for a “peaceful and democratic transition of power” in Tbilisi. This message will undoubtedly be heard loud and clear.

For Washington, this sticks-and-carrots approach currently involves potentially stopping support for defense and security and suspending the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter. For the EU, it might mean freezing candidate status or not starting negotiations while maintaining a politically cold relationship.

Conversely, both the EU and the US are offering extremely attractive incentives to Georgia. The US suggests closer economic ties and the prospect of enhanced trade relations. If Congress receives clearance from the President or the State Department indicating “significant and sustained progress” towards reinvigorating democracy, including conducting free and fair elections in October 2024, it could pave the way for closer economic, security, and people-to-people ties.

This clearance would enable the US Trade Representative to initiate negotiations for a comprehensive preferential trade agreement between the two countries. Additionally, a policy package will be created to strengthen people-to-people contacts, academic exchanges, and visa liberalization between the US and Georgia. The MEGOBARI Act bill also includes provisions for an economic development and modernization package for Georgia, developed in collaboration with international partners.

Regarding defense and security, the MEGOBARI Act mandates that the President, in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, prepare a package for Georgia. This package will include security and defense equipment tailored for territorial defense against Russian aggression, as well as training, maintenance, and operational support.

On the other hand, the EU has a very tangible in-

centive—the opening of accession talks, albeit conditional on some painful reforms in the judiciary, power sharing, and democratic oversight. In both cases, the incentives are well formulated and straightforward, but they must be better publicized for them to work. Moreover, the contrast between what Georgia could have and what it could lose must be made clearer and starker, particularly starting in September as the pre-election campaign heats up.

In a similar vein, if accession talks with Georgia will not be opened in 2024, the EU must let the Georgian citizens know about it before the October 2024 elections.

## Lessons from Other Sanctions

Sanctions on government representatives, including parliamentarians, for undermining democracy have become a crucial tool for international actors seeking to promote democratic governance and accountability. The USA and European Union member states have implemented similar measures against individuals and entities in Guatemala, Venezuela, Belarus, Myanmar, and other countries to support democratic processes and deter anti-democratic activities. However, sanctions did not lead to the desired changes in the policies or the actions of the sanctioned governments in any of these cases.

In Guatemala, Canada imposed sanctions on individuals linked to corruption and human rights violations to support the democratically elected government of Bernardo Arévalo.

In Belarus, the US sanctioned officials following the contested 2020 presidential election and the violent crackdown on protesters, redirecting financial aid to support civil society and independent media.

In Myanmar, sanctions were imposed after the

military coup in February 2021, targeting military leaders and regime-controlled entities to pressure the junta to restore democratic governance. Financial assistance was redirected towards humanitarian aid and support for civil society groups, bypassing the military-led government.

Similarly, in Cambodia, the US sanctioned officials responsible for suppressing political opposition, reducing direct financial aid to the government, and increasing support for NGOs promoting human rights and democratic governance.

In Venezuela, extensive sanctions were imposed on members of the National Assembly and the Constituent Assembly involved in electoral fraud, human rights abuses, and corruption. These sanctions resulted in a significant shift in financial aid strategies, with funds redirected toward humanitarian assistance and support for the population through NGOs.

Russia and Zimbabwe have also faced sanctions targeting officials for actions against democratic movements. These sanctions have reduced economic and diplomatic engagement while maintaining humanitarian aid and support for civil society.

The cases of Iran, Russia, Venezuela, and Belarus clearly indicate that even the harshest sanctions cannot necessarily result in regime change or alter regime behavior. They can even be counterproductive by pushing those sanctioned regimes towards ‘foreign policy alternatives,’ which are usually more authoritarian and have worse human rights records.

While sanctions can indeed weaken rogue governments, if political opposition and non-governmental institutions remain fragmented and underfunded, they stand a negligible chance of being relevant and effective. Hence, in parallel with sanctions, robust and open support of local forces

of change is indispensably critical.

At the end of the day, getting rid of sanctioned regimes is only possible through local actors across the political aisle who oppose the regime's policies. They should be emboldened by active support from the independent media and non-governmental institutions, which, together with the political opposition, are obvious primary targets for the ruling regimes.

## Need to Target Public Perceptions Instead of Policy Change

Sanctions have not succeeded in changing the actions of authoritarian leaders in the past, and they are unlikely to be effective in Georgia's case either. Western powers seem to have recognized the authoritarian nature of the Georgian regime only recently after the Georgian Dream party rushed through a Russian-style "foreign influence" law. This law, set to take effect in early September, threatens to shut down Georgian NGOs and the media. For years, local civil society organizations and experts have issued numerous warnings. Still, these were largely ignored despite occasional strong verbal reactions and isolated measures such as the EU freezing a EUR 40 million loan or the US sanctioning individual judges.

Unlike Venezuela, Zimbabwe, Russia, or Myanmar, Georgia remains an electoral democracy until the 26 October parliamentary elections. However, similar to these other states, the Georgian regime is unlikely to change its policies in response to sanctions for two main reasons.

Firstly, backtracking on the law on foreign agents, improving the democratic environment, and abandoning authoritarianism would be political suicide for the Ivanishvili regime, which is fully committed to its current grab-the-power-at-all-costs path ahead of the October elections. Yielding to

external pressure would signify a defeat the government cannot afford.

***The Georgian Dream does not yet believe in the seriousness of the sanctions.***

Secondly, the Georgian Dream does not yet believe in the seriousness of the sanctions. Most sanctions are not yet causing significant discomfort for Georgian Dream leaders. Visa bans are obscure and intangible, financial sanctions have not yet been implemented, and the overhaul of bilateral relations is too distant, hinging on electoral outcomes in Washington and new power dynamics in the EU, including the results of the French parliamentary elections and the potential influence of conservatives and the far right in the EU.

Georgian case may seem quite complicated, but in reality, it is surprisingly simple. Georgia has one and only decision/policy maker – Bidzina Ivanishvili; therefore, targeting only his minions does not make much sense. They are easily disposable and substitutable unless the Big Boss feels a heat personally. So far, he managed to dodge any attempts by the West to reason with him or "send a message" to him by sanctioning politically insignificant players.

The West still has time to reconsider its approach to sanctions. From now until the parliamentary elections, the intensity of the sanctions and pressure should be increased. This involves deciding to list new individuals, withhold funds, or publicly shun Georgian Dream officials. These steps should be carefully calibrated in the lead-up to the elections.

The goal of these sanctions should be to generate significant negative public sentiment towards the ruling Georgian Dream party among Georgians rather than hoping for policy changes from

the current regime. As the Law on Foreign Agents kicks in early September and Civil Society Organizations start shutting down or become paralyzed because of impossible fines, the EU and the US must step up their sanctions, showing unwavering support to the CSOs and letting Georgian people know that with the current Georgian government in helm, Georgians will lose European perspective and strategic partnership with the US. This has been said already, but the right time to further push for this narrative will be September.

***Historically, Western sanctions have aimed to change authoritarian regimes or their policies. In Georgia's case, the announced but not yet enforced sanctions seem to still aim to change the regime's policies.***

Historically, Western sanctions have aimed to change authoritarian regimes or their policies. In Georgia's case, the announced but not yet enforced sanctions seem to still aim to change the regime's policies. This approach might prove futile and unsuccessful, considering that the Georgian system of governance is heavily influenced by a billionaire who is not easily swayed by Western rhetoric and half-hearted sanctions.

However, if played smartly, the West can indeed have Georgia correct its policies. But only after the current regime has been changed through the October parliamentary elections, which could indeed become a game-changing moment if Western robust sanctions is complemented by equally robust support for the opposition forces inside or outside the Georgian political spectrum. ■

# To Suspend or Not to Suspend?

**S**ixty countries around the world benefit from visa-free travel to the EU. Georgia is one of them. The European Union made one of the best decisions regarding Georgia in 2017 - scrapping short-term visa requirements, which resulted in more than 1 million Georgians benefiting from visa-free travel in the last seven years.

**Visa liberalization comes with responsibility, and the government has to be loyal to European values, protect human rights and democracy, and not backtrack on the EU path.**

Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus that enjoys this privilege. However, visa liberalization comes with responsibility, and the government has to be loyal to European values, protect human rights and democracy, and not backtrack on the EU path. The visa liberalization process is conditional, and the country willing to get it needs to fulfill the visa liberalization action plan (VLAP). It took Georgia more than three years to fulfill

[VLAP](#) requirements, including fighting against discrimination, protecting personal data, respecting human rights, and tackling high-level corruption.

The EU [regulation](#) 2018/1806 sets the process of visa-free travel. The Commission is tasked to “report regularly to the European Parliament and the Council, at least once a year, for seven years after the date of entry into force of visa liberalization for that third country, and after that whenever the Commission considers it to be necessary or upon request by the European Parliament or by the Council.” Visa liberalization is not granted eternally. The EU keeps the right to suspend it based on the following [grounds](#):

- There is a substantial increase (more than 50%) in the number of people arriving irregularly from visa-free countries, including people found to be staying irregularly and persons refused entry at the border;
- The substantial increase (more than 50%) in the number of asylum applications from countries with low recognition rates (around 3-4%);



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- Decline in cooperation on readmission;
- Increased risk to the security of Member State;
- Non-compliance with the specific requirements to assess the appropriateness of granting visa liberalization.

In addition, the European Union is now considering extending the grounds that would entail a third country's lack of alignment with the EU's visa policy in cases where this may lead to increased arrivals to the EU, investor citizenship schemes, and hybrid threats.

The European Union sees the visa liberalization suspension mechanism as a tool of the last resort. Only once has the EU halted visa-free travel. This was the case with Vanuatu, a small island in the South Pacific Ocean with around 300,000 people. The decision was made due to the risks posed by Vanuatu's investor citizenship schemes (so-called 'golden passport' schemes).

The suspension mechanism allows Member States to notify circumstances leading to a possible suspension and for the Commission to trigger the suspension mechanism on its initiative. However, before taking that decision, the European Commission needs to consider the situation of human rights in that third country and the possible consequences of visa suspension. The duration of the visa suspension could initially be up to nine months, with the possibility of being extended up to 18 months and then entirely scrapped. Notably, the suspension could be applied to specific categories of nationals of the third country concerned.

## Russian Law vs. Visa-Free Travel

The number of Georgians migrating to the EU and staying there as illegal migrants or seeking official asylum has increased in recent years. Most of these migrants are fleeing poverty and seeking a better life in the EU. The [media](#) occasionally reported that some EU member states, unhappy with

the increased migration from Georgia, even raised the possibility of triggering the visa liberalization suspension mechanism.

***When deciding whether to suspend visa-free visas with a third country, two aspects are considered: technical data and political choice.***

When deciding whether to suspend visa-free visas with a third country, two aspects are considered: technical data and political choice. The technical

details of Georgia's case do not look good. Despite the low recognition rate (7%), the number of Georgian asylum seekers in the EU and Schengen zone countries was the highest as compared to Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkan countries. According to the 2023 [report](#) of the EU Agency for Asylum - Georgian citizens were in the top eight countries of origin in 2022 (after Syria, Afghanistan, Türkiye, Venezuela, Colombia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) seeking asylum (first-time asylum seekers) in the EU and Schengen zone. Overall, [26,450](#) Georgian citizens asked for asylum in the Schengen countries in 2022.

| Country            | 2022   | Recognition Rate | 2021   | Recognition Rate |
|--------------------|--------|------------------|--------|------------------|
| Albania            | 12,955 | 9%               | 11,320 | 9%               |
| Bosnia-Herzegovina | 2,235  | 8%               | 2,705  | 5%               |
| Georgia            | 26,450 | 7%               | 14,635 | 5%               |
| Moldova            | 8,365  | 2%               | 7,900  | 1%               |
| Montenegro         | 420    | 4%               | 435    | 4%               |
| North Macedonia    | 6,715  | 2%               | 5415   | 1%               |
| Serbia             | 4,265  | 5%               | 3,430  | 6%               |

According to the latest data, the number of first-time asylum seekers from Georgia to the EU and Schengen zone countries slightly dropped to 21,805 in 2023. However, Georgian citizens, together with the citizens of Syria, Afghanistan, Türkiye, Venezuela, Colombia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Morocco, Egypt, Peru, and Iraq, are among the top 12 countries of origin seeking asylum.

***The latest development linked to the adoption of the Russian-style law on foreign influence and the so-called "anti-LGBTQI" law dramatically changed the reality on the ground.***

In the last report issued in October 2023 under the visa suspension mechanism, the EU praised Georgia for cooperating closely with Member

States on readmission. The rate of positive decisions by the Georgian authorities on readmission requests averaged 98% for 2017-2022. However, the latest development linked to the adoption of the Russian-style law on foreign influence and the so-called "anti-LGBTQI" law dramatically changed the reality on the ground. The laws demonstrated backtracking on visa liberalization action plan requirements, particularly related to protecting personal data, human rights, and equality.

In response to the latest political development and the Georgian Dream's attempt to derail Georgia from the European and Euro-Atlantic Integration path, the European Parliament adopted the [resolution](#) in April 2024, which called on the European Commission "to promptly assess the impact of Georgia's planned 'foreign agent' law on Georgia's

*continuous fulfillment of the visa liberalization benchmarks, particularly the fundamental rights benchmark, a crucial component of the EU visa liberalization policy.”*

The EU member states broadly share the European Parliament’s standing. As the EU Ambassador to Georgia, Paweł Herczyński, put it - the EU is ready to consider “all options” that can be introduced towards Georgia due to adopting the foreign agent’s law, including the suspension of visa [liberalization](#).

What kept Georgia from being suspended from the visa-free scheme before was not the country’s excellent performance and good benchmarks but its political closeness with the EU. Once the political umbilical cord is cut, only technicalities will speak against the Georgian case, thereby making the visa suspension more likely.

## How the Suspension Works

The European Commission is empowered to trigger the visa suspension mechanism. It can do that by following the examination of a notification from the EU member states or its own analysis. Triggering the suspension procedure can be done automatically when a simple majority of EU member states notifies the European Commission regarding the existence of one or more of the previously mentioned five grounds.

***The risk that Georgia might face the harsh reality of potentially losing the most tangible benefit of EU integration - visa-free travel - is becoming increasingly realistic.***

Considering that a simple majority is required for the decision, the long-standing partner of the ruling Georgian Dream party, the Hungarian government, would be unable to block the decision-mak-

ing process. Thus, the risk that Georgia might face the harsh reality of potentially losing the most tangible benefit of EU integration - visa-free travel - is becoming increasingly realistic.

***The GD would quickly use the suspension to promote propaganda that the European Union punishes ordinary people, thus stirring even more anti-European sentiments.***

However, the European Commission and many member states view scrapping visa-free travel as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this could be yet another and the clearest signal to the ruling Georgian Dream that it has to pay a price for derailing the country from the EU track and not respecting the choice of its people. On the other hand, however, it will negatively affect ordinary citizens. The GD would quickly use the suspension to promote propaganda that the European Union punishes ordinary people, thus stirring even more anti-European sentiments. According to the Georgian Dream, Europe already wants to drag Georgia into the war (the global war party narrative), is supporting coup d’état attempts through civil society (sovereign democracy narrative), and is imposing immoral values (gay propaganda narrative) on Georgia. In addition to this, the suspension of visa-free travel and anti-European sentiments might skyrocket. What would augment the problem is that the EU will need to engage in a detailed explanation of this decision, which it probably won’t do; even if the Commission decides to communicate its message correctly, it will fail to compete with the potent propaganda narratives of the Georgian Dream.

When considering the activation of the visa-suspension mechanism, the EU should also think about the civil society activists in Georgia who are facing physical threats and live under state-backed terror. Suspension of the visa-free travel would



lock them in the country. They would not have the opportunity to leave Georgia in case of the repressions already announced by the GD leader Bidzina Ivanishvili in his public [speech](#) on 29 April 2024.

***Making the political decision to scrap visa-free travel four months before the election is risky.***

Making the political decision to scrap visa-free travel four months before the election is risky. On the one hand, it might be interpreted by the

ruling Georgian Dream party-affiliated propagandistic media as if the EU is interfering in Georgia's domestic affairs to make the voters angry to vote against the GD. However, at the same time, this could be yet again a direct signal to the Georgian people from Brussels that this is the GD that stands between the EU and their aspiration to join the club. This would be a powerful signal to young voters (up to 300,000 between the ages of 18-24) who go against the Russian law, enjoy visa-free mobility the most, and regularly travel to the EU and Schengen zone countries ■

# European Parliament's Complex Landscape: Can the Far-Right Block Enlargement?

“Europe with no balls, no blood, no faith, a fascistic, LGBTQ+ Europe, America’s sissy Europe, is losing! The true ones are coming!” - posted by one of the Georgian Dream’s leading TV propagandists, Shalva Ramishvili, in the aftermath of the EU Parliament June 2024 elections. It is not at all unlikely that GD leaders are not capable of capturing the nuances of European political processes, but what counts more to them is to exploit the good results of the European far-right parties for internal political propaganda: the GD is on the right track as the like-minded parties are winning a victory in Europe.

The reality of the balance of power expressed by the results of the European elections is much more complex than the propaganda messages of the GD, and its consequences for the candidate countries,

including Georgia, can be diverse and challenging to predict. What appears at first glance is that the pro-European majority, represented by the Center-Right (EPP), Center-Left (SD), the Liberals (Renew), and the Greens (Greens/EFA), has been maintained. The numbers show that while the Center-Right made slight progress, the Liberals and Greens suffered severe losses.

***The Far-Right has indeed progressed but remains mainly in the minority and divided above all.***

The Far-Right has indeed progressed but remains mainly in the minority and divided above all. These divisions are illustrated by the fact that these parties are divided into three different parliamentary factions: ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists), ID (Identity and Democracy), and



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Non-Inscrits (which is not in itself a European political party but brings together within it the radical “orphan” parties, not accepted in the other groups). Additionally, as the political nomadism of the Far-Right parties between the three groups remains commonplace, a stable and comprehensive alliance between them is still a challenge. Recently, Viktor Orbán announced that he was laying the foundations for a new European parliamentary group by trying to attract the parties currently members of the ECR and the ID. While he managed to secure 24 possible MEPs from ultra-right parties in Austria and the Czech Republic (and his own Fidesz), he still needs MEPs from at least four more countries to form a parliamentary group.

***Despite some progress of the Far-Right forces and Orbán’s insistence, Hungary and its Fidesz may lose the strategically important position of the Commissioner on Neighborhood and Enlargement, currently held by Olivér Várhelyi.***

On 28 June, the European Council [approved](#) the representatives of the three mainstream political parties at the helms of EU institutions. Ursula von der Leyen from the EPP, a strong supporter of Ukraine and EU enlargement, was maintained as the President of the Commission. Kaja Kallas from the Liberals will take up the foreign policy portfolio. The socialists and António Costa (Portugal) will get the European Council’s presidency. Despite some progress of the Far-Right forces and Orbán’s insistence, Hungary and its Fidesz may lose the strategically important position of the Commissioner on Neighborhood and Enlargement, currently held by Olivér Várhelyi.

The Far-Right will not be able to block legislation in the EP aimed at further supporting Ukraine either, and Kyiv will probably keep the preferential trade regime and benefits granted by the EU. But can we nevertheless pretend that everything is go-

ing very well and that the celebrations of the supporters of the European illiberal forces from the GD or Edinaya Rossiya are entirely unfounded?

While the Far-Right has been unable to rock the European boat, several significant trends may worry all pro-Europeans from Lisbon to Tbilisi. The heavy defeats of the French and German ruling parties (Macron’s liberal “Ensemble” and the German Social Democrats and the Greens) and the progression of the Far-Right in these two key countries, the general decline in support for enlargement and for the Ukrainian war effort against the Russian invader, the erosion of the “cordon sanitaire” against the Far-Right and attempts to “normalize” it, all represent challenges that would be wrong to ignore. The Georgian government, now openly anti-European and illiberal, may have been too quick to celebrate victory in June. Still, if trends continue, this may suit its affairs in the medium and long term.

## Creeping Influence Instead of Victory

In the June European Parliament elections, Far-Right parties came first in five countries (France, Italy, Hungary, Belgium, Austria) and second or third in another five (Germany, Poland, Netherlands, Slovakia, and Portugal). However, all Far-Right factions of the EP reunited (ECR+ID+ Non-Inscrits) still have roughly the same number of MEPs (201 out of 720, total number of MEPs) as the EPP alone (189). At the same time, these political forces are deeply divided and do not always share the same views on the EU foreign policy and neighborhood and enlargement issues.

***Most ECR parliamentary group members do not even consider themselves as positioned on the extreme right of the political spectrum.***

First, most ECR parliamentary group members do not even consider themselves as positioned on the extreme right of the political spectrum. For many years, British Conservatives were members of this group, and despite their relative euro-skepticism, it would have been inaccurate to qualify them as a Far-Right political movement. Nowadays, the leading political force in this group, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), is courted by the EPP and the EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen for her re-election, which means that the "cordon sanitaire" against the ECR has already significantly eroded. On the other hand, the attempts at rapprochement with a more radical ID group, namely, with Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN), were inconclusive, given that the divergences seemed more critical than the convergences. In addition, the ECR and its main political components are at odds with Viktor Orbán's Fidesz and other Non-Inscrits on several key issues, making their alignment impossible.

## A Far-Right is Not Always Tied to Russia's Interests

Their positioning about Russia sets a critical dividing line between the European extreme right parties. This logically translates into their attitude towards the war in Ukraine. Here, two relatively distinct groups emerge: the one with unambiguous support for Ukraine, wishing Kyiv victory, and the other, with past or present ties to Moscow, adopts a more unclear position, which de facto means an indulgent attitude towards Putin.

***Their positioning about Russia sets a critical dividing line between the European extreme right parties.***

The first category includes the Italian FdI and the Polish Prawo i Sprawiedliwość/Law and Justice (PiS), which clearly understand the danger Russia poses to the security of the entire European

continent. The Scandinavian parties of the same political family, Sweden's *Sverigedemokraterna*/Swedish Democrats (SD) and Finland's *Perussuomalaiset*/Finns Party (PS), also share this mistrust. They support their countries' NATO membership and see Russia as the main threat.

One could add to this group the Spanish Far-Right party Vox, which took a solid pro-Ukraine stance following the Russian full-scale aggression in February 2022. Its leader, Santiago Abascal, [supported](#) direct humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine and even said to accept Ukrainian refugees "instead of welcoming Muslim migrants" from the Middle East and North Africa. The Spanish Far-Right, taking roots from the Franco regime, has always been skeptical about Russia and the Soviet Union and has been accusing the Left of pro-Soviet and pro-Russian sympathies.

Despite the large-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent transformation of the Russian regime into a toxic partner, the other group of European Far-Right parties continues to maintain an ambiguous attitude towards the Kremlin. While hardly anyone dares to openly support the invasion and the blatant violation of basic principles of international law, these parties try to find extenuating circumstances for Russia and, above all, seem unwilling to participate in the Ukrainian war effort. This camp includes France's Rassemblement National/National Rally (RN), Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the Italian Lega of Matteo Salvini, Austria's Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs/Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the most explicit Russia supporter of all, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz from Hungary.

***The same anti-liberal forces that despised America are now fascinated by the figure of Donald Trump. The question here is whether being pro-Trump is being Atlanticist or the opposite.***

These divisions go together with the divergent positions over transatlantic relations. While all political Extreme Left parties are anti-American, not all Far-Right parties oppose the concept of “national sovereignty” to the idea of alliance with the US. Influenced by national histories and perceptions, the Polish PiS, the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), and the Italian FdI are pro-NATO and favor the US presence in Europe. However, the German AfD and the French RN saw their national sovereignty diminished by Washington. In recent years, the rise of Trumpism in America has shuffled the cards. The same anti-liberal forces that despised America are now fascinated by the figure of Donald Trump. The question here is whether being pro-Trump is being Atlanticist or the opposite.

## Divisions Everywhere, Even in the pro-Russian Camp

There are tensions even within the group, which we refer to as pro-Russian. For example, France's RN party, which not only won the European elections in France but also has powerful aspirations to form the country's government following the early French parliamentary elections on 30 June and 7 July, seems to feel a particular embarrassment for being associated with the Russian regime, something of which the media and political adversaries never fail to remind it. [Marked](#) by a loan of EUR 9 million received in 2014 on amicable terms from a Russian bank, as well as by a [warm welcome](#) in Moscow in 2017 by Vladimir Putin on the eve of the second round of the French presidential elections, Le Pen now denies being pro-Russian. The party has paid lip service to condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and promises to continue providing military aid to Kyiv in case they form the government in France. But, at the same time, the RN, via its new star politician, Jordan Bardella, [made public](#) that the party is reluctant to send “equipment capable of striking Russian territory to avoid escalation.”

This type of statement obviously cannot inspire confidence in a “clean break” with the Kremlin.

Recently, the RN, in its strategy of acquiring respectability and toning down its extremist image, initiated the exclusion of the AfD from the ID group, echoing the scandals linked to revisionist statements about the Nazi past and the proven links of some of its leaders with Russian and Chinese intelligence services. The Dutch Far-Right PVV party also supported Le Pen's position, while Austria's FPÖ was content with condemnation but did not go so far as to vote for exclusion. Finally, the AfD was excluded from the ID while the FPÖ announced a merger with Orbán's Fidesz and former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's ANO (Akce nespokojených občanů/Angry Citizen's Action) to build a new political group of Far-Right parties called Patriots for Europe. The detoxification and rounding of angles in the rhetoric of these parties is manifested by the distance they take vis-à-vis Russia. Still, doubts persist about the sincerity of this rupture and lead one to believe it is an electoral strategy.

## Opposite Views Regarding Enlargement

***The other bone of contention between the European Far-Right parties is the subject of EU enlargement.***

The other bone of contention between the European Far-Right parties is the subject of EU enlargement. If there is unanimity around hostility to immigration and the expansion of Islam on the European continent, the topic of enlargement is a dividing one. The majority is still vigorously against enlargement (RN, FPÖ, AfD), and this is also the case for the parties that remain relatively Atlanticist and are not particularly pro-Russian. For example, the Dutch PVV of Geert Wilders, the Belgian Vlaams Belang/Flemish Interest (VB), or

the Swedish SD do not want enlargement from the “classical rightist” perspective. This view is grounded in the desire not to share wealth and resources with new members who may be poorer and could compete with their national labor markets.

But there are Far-Right parties that are not against enlargement. First, there is Meloni’s FdI, which, in principle, is [not hostile](#) to enlargement to the countries of the Western Balkans and eastern neighbors if the latter meet certain conditions. The Spanish Vox could also fall into this category. These parties share a more global tendency that characterizes the Mediterranean member states, generally quite favorable to enlargement.

However, there are two additional specific cases of this trend: the Polish PiS and the Hungarian Fidesz. The PiS, as critical as it is of Europe, views Ukraine’s membership as crucial for its national security. More generally, this Polish Far-Right party is against re-emerging Russian revisionism and imperialism and builds its geopolitical agenda according to this factor. As for Fidesz, it is pro-enlargement based on the ambition of its leader, Viktor Orbán, to transform the EU from within by becoming its leader. In this context, Fidesz would like to open the doors of the EU to countries governed by political forces that share a similar worldview. This is the policy of “à la carte” enlargement. The candidates Fidesz would like to see as member states in the future are, therefore, Vučić’s Serbia, Ivanishvili’s Georgia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the leader of the Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik would play a key role. For the same reason, Orbán is very hostile to the accession of Ukraine and Moldova as far as liberal forces govern these countries.

## What Does Georgia Want?

Here, we must clearly distinguish between the government and the society because the ob-

jectives and desires of the two do not coincide. Georgian society has shown that it wants to join the EU and is ready to mobilize for this cause. Maintaining the course of European policy towards enlargement is, therefore, vital in the eyes of the population.

The government sees the European elections as a means of maintaining power in Tbilisi. To this end, it is taking an increasingly apparent authoritarian turn, inevitably bringing it closer to Russia and further away from European integration. The forces of the European political mainstream strongly criticize the GD government and affirm that the integration process can only be frozen; worse, sanctions and backward steps are not excluded.

***For this, it is in the interest of the GD to see the main pro-European parties: the Liberals, the Centrists of the Right and the Left, and the Greens be replaced by the Eurosceptic, nationalist, ultra-conservative forces for whom the rule of law is no longer the central component of conditionality.***

The GD cannot be satisfied with this situation. Even if the government is increasingly anti-European, it needs to maintain the European integration process, or at least the illusion of it, because it must consider the opinion of the vast majority of its population. This process may be pure fiction, as with the accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU. For this, it is in the interest of the GD to see the main pro-European parties: the Liberals, the Centrists of the Right and the Left, and the Greens be replaced by the Eurosceptic, nationalist, ultraconservative forces for whom the rule of law is no longer the central component of conditionality.

If the GD considers the Far-Right’s victory to be

a good thing, it is because, in relations with their neighbors and the enlargement dossier, the Far-Right parties do not attach the same importance to the criteria of democracy, the rule of law, the protection of minorities and free and fair elections. They are motivated by more individual interests. Meloni's Italy, for example, has decided to support Albania's candidacy as the latter has [signed](#) an agreement on immigration control with the Italian government. Commissioner Várhelyi, representing the interests of the Fidesz government in Budapest, staunchly supported Serbia and Georgia despite the apparent democratic backsliding in these countries.

***More right-wing extremism in the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the member states' national governments means less democratic conditionality for the candidate countries.***

More right-wing extremism in the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the member states' national governments means less democratic conditionality for the candidate countries. If Europe ceases to be and act as a force for democratization in its neighborhood, governments with authoritarian tendencies, such as the GD's, can only be strengthened.

In conclusion, the results of the 2024 European Parliamentary elections set the stage for a more

conservative and possibly fragmented approach to enlargement policy. The mainstream pro-enlargement, pro-EU, and pro-Ukraine forces still prevail, and it is unlikely that Far-Right MEPs could gather the majority on enlargement-related topics. But the current situation will increase sharp debates on these issues, maybe even slow down some decisions to come, especially those related to the institutional reform of the Union, which, for their part, are necessary to prepare the enlargement and the arrival of the new member states.

The creeping gains in votes and the mandates of the European Far-Right and their electoral success in two leading EU member states, France and Germany, do not give us a reason to be reassured. The upcoming snap parliamentary elections in France contain even more severe risks than the past European elections. The arrival to power of a radical right-wing force in one of the Union's key countries would also have consequences at the European level, notably in the composition of the Commission. The Far-Right government in France, if allied with Italy, Austria, and Netherlands, could also form the blocking minority in the Councils since the EU rules provide that the four states, where 65% of the EU's population resides, can block any decision. The future enlargement and the European future of countries such as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are therefore also decided at the national ballot boxes in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland ■



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# **GEO POLITICS**

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