

GEO POLITICS

№19 | JUNE 2025

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2960-9453

GEO POLITICS

Issue Nº19

June, 2025

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Issue	№19
June	2025
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual exchange, nurturing a communal space where each person can contribute meaningfully to the broader geopolitical discourse.

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

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



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The Need for a Brand New Way

The world's security architecture is fraying — and not at the edges, but at its core. Institutions meant to safeguard stability have become slow and self-doubting, while revisionist powers, like Russia, have exploited the gaps and promulgated insecurity, destruction, disinformation, and bloodshed. In this volatile landscape, Ukraine has recently redrawn the boundaries of asymmetric warfare. In a move that stunned Moscow and inspired democratic forces throughout the world, President Zelenskyy launched a sprawling “spider-web” of drone operations that have disabled nearly 30% of Russia's strategic aviation fleet. The lesson? Agility, ingenuity, and courage can outmatch sheer scale.

That same “spider-web logic” — decentralized, disruptive, and decisive — should be a lesson far beyond the battlefield. The EU, still entangled in its bureaucracy and risk aversion, must reimagine enlargement not as a procedural crawl but as a strategic leap. The U.S., too, cannot afford to outsource urgency: pressing Russia and brokering credible peace frameworks — from Ukraine to the Caucasus — demands bold initiative, real-life economic and military pressure, and not just bravado and appeasement. And for countries like Georgia, where the fight against authoritarian backsliding intersects with foreign subversion and the fight against Russian propaganda, this is a call to weave new, efficient networks of civic resistance and democratic resilience. Zelenskyy's “web” may be made of drones, but its strands — speed, creativity, and clarity of purpose — are tools of survival and strength for us all. The Brand New Way of defending freedom and democracy has been shown, now it is up to us to follow it.

Vano Chkhikvadze opens this issue of *GEOPOLITICS* with a sharp examination of the EU's ongoing dilemma: how to engage with the Georgian Dream government without legitimizing it. Since late 2024, the EU has pursued a policy of political distancing, freezing assistance, and suspending high-level dialogue in response to Georgia's democratic collapse. While this non-recognition strategy reflects a principled opposition to authoritarian backsliding, it has thus far failed to prompt a course reversal in Tbilisi. The Georgian Dream continues to suppress dissent, rewrite laws, and manipulate its Western image, parading photo ops with Viktor Orbán and even Emmanuel Macron to feign legitimacy at home. Still, Brussels hesitates: some officials push for re-engagement in the name of geopolitical pragmatism, while others insist that any renewed dialogue must come with clear red lines—new elections, the repeal of repressive laws, and the release of political prisoners. The article outlines a two-track path forward: conditional re-engagement paired with credible threats, including expanded sanctions and infringement procedures. Only such principled firmness can prevent Georgia from slipping irreversibly into the illiberal bloc.

Shota Gvineria reinforces this warning by analyzing how Georgia's strategic marginalization reflects NATO's broader indecision. Once a poster child for Euro-Atlantic integration, Georgia is now at risk of becoming a cautionary tale. Gvineria illustrates how NATO's failure to maintain political engagement with pro-reform actors has allowed Moscow—and its proxies in Tbilisi—to recast the alliance as irrelevant or even hostile. This vacuum, he argues, is not only dangerous for Georgia's sovereignty but corrosive for NATO's

credibility in other contested zones, including Ukraine and Moldova. Gvineria calls for a proactive NATO stance, one that goes beyond technical assistance to support civil society and electoral integrity directly.

Sergi Kapanadze builds on this with an analysis of the South Caucasus's shifting architecture. While Georgia drifts toward authoritarian isolation, Armenia and Azerbaijan edge closer to a historic peace deal, which could unlock long-delayed regional connectivity projects. Kapanadze warns that Georgia, once the region's bridge to Europe, now risks becoming a dead-end. Infrastructure investments—from the Black Sea electricity cable to the Middle Corridor—are on hold as Brussels loses trust in its political leadership. Georgia can only regain relevance, if it restores its democratic credentials and reclaims its role as a hub, not a bottleneck, in Europe's eastward strategy.

Miro Popkhadze continues the analysis of regional dynamics by zooming in on one of the region's most strategic chokepoints: the Anaklia deep-sea port. In theory, Anaklia could anchor Western presence in the Black Sea and serve as a launchpad for democratic connectivity. In practice, however, the project has been captured by competing interests—including Chinese state-linked investors—while U.S. and EU engagement remains timid. Popkhadze urges the West to treat Anaklia as more than an economic project. With China expanding its maritime influence and Russia contesting Black Sea dominance, Anaklia can still become a flagship of transatlantic cooperation—if only the political will materializes in Washington and Brussels.

Thornike Gordadze takes us further afield to show how regional power shifts in the Middle East reverberate across the Caucasus. Focusing on Donald Trump's backchannel negotiations with Iran, Gordadze outlines how a narrow nuclear deal

could empower Tehran and Moscow simultaneously—at Ukraine's expense. He warns that by sidelining the EU and treating Iran as a pragmatic partner rather than a malign actor, Washington risks undermining the credibility of its sanctions regime and alienating democratic allies. The ripple effects of such a deal could alter the calculus in Baku, Yerevan, and even Tbilisi, where authoritarian learning and multi-vector diplomacy are already reshaping foreign policy.

Finally, Jaba Devdariani brings the story back home, chronicling the slow demolition of Georgia's civil service. Once hailed as a quiet success of EU-backed reforms, Georgia's professional bureaucracy has now been hollowed out. Devdariani traces this rollback from the 2015 Civil Service Law—championed by the Georgian Dream itself—to the abolition of the Civil Service Bureau in 2025. What remains is a politicized apparatus, stripped of safeguards and subservient to the ruling party's whims. Yet, Devdariani also finds resilience in the bureaucracy's remnants. The organizational memory, skills, and norms developed under EU tutelage may still survive this authoritarian winter—and could become the backbone of Georgia's democratic recovery, should the tide turn again.

Together, these articles capture a region—and a European policy consensus—at an inflection point. The South Caucasus, long seen as peripheral, has become a litmus test for how the West responds to creeping autocracy, strategic manipulation, and institutional erosion. From the drone warfare over Engels airbase to backroom diplomacy in Baku, from disappearing EU leverages to sabotaged civil service reforms, the stakes are rising ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

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Engaging Without Recognizing? The EU's Dilemma of Dealing with the Georgian Dream

Since the end of 2024, the European Union has been in search of an efficient policy towards the authoritarian Georgian Dream (GD), which has derailed Georgia's European integration path and has engaged in anti-democratic law-making and persecution of political opponents, civil society, and independent media.

The EU has come to recognize that its pressure resources and leverage are limited, mainly due to the lack of consensus on foreign policy matters. With Hungary and Slovakia firmly backing the Georgian Dream, the EU is unable to impose sanctions that could hurt the authoritarian regime in Tbilisi. As an interim solution, some EU member states have imposed unilateral measures against officials of the ruling party.

Since 2024, formal engagement between Brussels and Tbilisi is suspended with the platforms under the EU-Georgia Association Agreement remaining on hold for nearly a year and the EU's financial assistance to the Georgian government frozen. No high-level contacts have taken place in a sobering message to the GD that "business as usual" can not be sustained. This policy of non-recognition aims to pressure the oligarch to reverse course and realign with the EU path, something which is still backed by almost 80% of Georgian citizens and is anchored in the country's Constitution. In the recent joint [statement](#) the EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos and High Representative/Vice President Kaja Kallas, stressed that "the EU is ready to consider the return of Georgia to the EU accession path if the authorities take credible steps to reverse democratic backsliding."



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However, this non-recognition approach has yet to yield substantial results.

Sanctions are inherently slow-acting tools when it comes to altering the behavior of authoritarian regimes. Targeted officials often adapt, maintain a defiant posture, and wait for pressure from the sanctioning side to ease.

Sanctions are inherently slow-acting tools when it comes to altering the behavior of authoritarian regimes. Targeted officials often adapt, maintain a defiant posture, and wait for pressure from the sanctioning side to ease. In recent months, several top figures from the Georgian Dream who had been sanctioned—among them the Minister of Interior, the Head of the State Security Service, and the Prosecutor-General—have stepped down from their positions. Sanctioning the new wave of officials will take time, giving the regime space to recalibrate and entrench itself further.

At the same time, concerns are growing in Brussels that continued non-recognition might push the Georgian Dream leadership closer to alignment with anti-Western actors. Georgian Dream leaders have intensified contacts with leaders of Central Asian autocracies, including high-level meetings with the presidents of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan. Notably, Mr. Kobakhidze met Viktor Orbán for the eighth time in the last year—more frequently than with any senior EU institutional figure—underscoring the government's tilt towards Europe's illiberal bloc.

These arguments are leading some to question whether the EU's strategy of maintaining a cold shoulder towards the Georgian leadership remains wise. After all, the EU recently held a summit with Central Asian states, [celebrating](#) the start of a “new era” in EU-Central Asia relations. This contrast raises doubts about the consistency and

effectiveness of isolating Georgia's government while engaging similarly authoritarian regimes elsewhere.

Fortunately, skepticism towards full engagement with the GD dominates among the EU decision-makers. Most in Brussels and key capitals continue to support a policy of political distancing until the Georgian Dream recommits to the EU path and restores basic democratic institutions. In January 2025, Estonia's Parliament (Riigikogu) [passed](#) a resolution, with 59 votes in favor and nine against, refusing to recognize the legitimacy of Georgia's “fraudulent” elections, parliament, government, or president. Lithuania has consistently [argued](#) that resolving the crisis requires free and fair elections as well as the repeal of laws targeting the political opposition and civil society. The Dutch, the Swedes, the Germans, and the Czechs are also critical of the Georgian Dream and reportedly do not plan to engage with Ivanishvili's regime. A recent [report](#) by the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) called for a reassessment of the EU's policy toward Georgia and warned of “conditional suspension” of economic cooperation and privileges under the Association Agreement.

In April 2025, Commissioner Marta Kos emphasized the importance of dialogue with the Georgian Dream, [stating](#) that while the easiest course is to remain silent, the EU must also understand what it can offer and what the Georgian side is prepared to do. According to the Commissioner, the EU is considering initiating dialogue at a lower level with the possibility of gradually scaling it up— “exploring how we will be able to do this dialogue in the sense that we could be able to bring Georgia back to the European way.” The European External Action Service (EEAS), led by Kaja Kallas, shares this view and is currently considering convening the EU-Georgia Human Rights Dialogue for the first time in two years. The Georgian Dream will likely decline such a dialogue as it would im-

ply that the regime recognizes the problems with human rights, which the ruling party probably will not do for political and propaganda reasons.

While the EU is deliberating what steps to take, the Georgian Dream continues routinely portraying the European Union as part of a global “war party” and the “deep state,” regularly insulting European leaders as ruling party officials continue to seek international recognition and project legitimacy on the global stage. This was a key motive behind Prime Minister Kobakhidze’s [participation](#) in the European Political Community Summit in Tirana in May 2025, followed by an umpteenth meeting with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in June. The Georgian Dream’s propaganda outlets swiftly circulated [images](#) of Kobakhidze shaking hands with French President Emmanuel Macron, framing it as evidence of EU-level acceptance. Warm encounters with Orbán have become favored propaganda material used to emphasize Georgia’s supposed alignment with core Christian European values—symbolized, in the Georgian Dream’s narrative, by Orbán’s defiance of EU pressure.

For Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream leadership, such moments serve a clear domestic agenda: to reassure their supporters and inner circle that, despite mounting criticism and sanctions, the EU still engages with them—proof, in their narrative, that Western pressure is superficial and ineffective.

For Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream leadership, such moments serve a clear domestic agenda: to reassure their supporters and inner circle that, despite mounting criticism and sanctions, the EU still engages with them—proof, in their narrative, that Western pressure is superficial and in-

effective. This places the EU at a crossroads: does it have the resolve to act as a serious geopolitical player, or will it tacitly accept another authoritarian regime as a candidate in its neighborhood?

Why the Georgian Dream Still Courts the West?

Despite its announcement of a “pause” in the EU accession process, the Georgian Dream’s leadership remains unwilling to abandon the European track formally. Instead, it carefully manipulates language to obscure the fundamental shift in direction, telling pro-European voters that EU membership remains the official goal while taking actions that contradict this claim. Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze has publicly [stated](#) that Georgia will still fulfill “over 90%” of the Association Agreement obligations by 2028 and that the country will be ready for EU accession by 2030—statements designed to maintain the illusion of continuity even as Brussels imposes sanctions and freezes dialogue.

There are clear strategic reasons for the Georgian Dream’s reluctance to sever ties with the West fully. First, the ruling party is highly sensitive to the domestic narrative that it is diplomatically isolated and unwelcome in Europe. This vulnerability explains its recent flurry of diplomatic activity.

The Georgian Dream is wagering that Europe’s geopolitical pragmatism will eventually override its normative commitments.

Second, the Georgian Dream is wagering that Europe’s geopolitical pragmatism will eventually override its normative commitments. The EU’s increasing interest in connectivity across the South Caucasus—via the Middle Corridor infrastructure, the Black Sea electricity cable, and planned energy deals with Azerbaijan and Central Asia—gives

the ruling party hope that Brussels will ultimately prioritize strategic cooperation over democratic backsliding. This logic gained further traction following the April 2025 EU-Central Asia Summit, which hailed a “[new era](#)” in relations, and HRVP Kaja Kallas’s official [visit](#) to Baku just weeks later.

The Georgian Dream’s calculation is straightforward: in a context of deepening EU-U.S. trade disputes, shifting energy routes, and an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal that could unlock regional stability, Brussels will be under pressure to engage with whomever controls Georgia, democratic or not. Ivanishvili’s long-term bet is that Georgia’s geography and infrastructure will make it indispensable to the EU, allowing his regime to rebrand itself as a pragmatic, if illiberal, partner in a broader Eurasian connectivity architecture. The question now confronting EU policymakers is whether or not they are willing to reward that wager.

What Kind of Engagement?

Brussels is becoming increasingly uncertain about how to handle Georgia. While the country has featured in the last three European Council meetings, the EU still lacks a coherent strategy or effective leverage to address Georgia’s deepening democratic crisis. Concerns are growing that Georgia may be slipping away, politically and strategically.

The EU’s limited engagement is primarily due to competing priorities, including the war in Ukraine, strained EU-U.S. relations, and internal democratic backsliding. As Georgia risks falling off the agenda, some in Brussels argue that the current policy of isolation and sanctions has failed to deliver results and may be driving the Georgian Dream closer to Russia, Iran, and China.

Critics of disengagement point to the EU’s pragmatic relations with authoritarian regimes in Central

Asia, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan, and suggest Georgia should not be treated differently.

At the same time, others caution that complete disengagement is unrealistic, especially in areas like tax transparency and organized crime. Georgia also remains key to the EU’s energy diversification strategy, particularly as part of alternative transit routes bypassing Russia, highlighted by recent EU outreach to Turkmenistan and the South Caucasus.

Yet, EU officials remain wary of giving the Georgian government any opportunity to claim that Brussels has moved past the fraudulent October 2024 elections and returned to “business as usual.”

This is where the EU finds itself walking a tightrope. The dilemma is whether and how to engage with the Georgian authorities, whose ruling party has been denounced by the European Parliament as illegitimate and responsible for state capture, without legitimizing them. Even low-level engagement risks being exploited by the Georgian Dream to create the impression that Brussels has returned to its former routine. This, in turn, undermines the EU’s credibility and emboldens authoritarian actors across the region.

The regime’s central goal is to secure international recognition for Bidzina Ivanishvili’s authoritarian rule—and it has shown it will use any opening from Brussels to claim exactly that.

If the EU does decide to re-engage, it must do so with a well-defined set of goals and safeguards. The context remains dire: dozens of political prisoners remain behind bars, civil society activists are beaten and harassed, NGO leaders are about to face criminal liability, political parties might be outlawed by the end of this year, the propaganda machinery is working full force with the Russian message box,

the legitimacy of the 2024 elections is widely disputed, and the EU, the U.S., and the UK have [sanctioned](#) Georgian Dream-affiliated individuals and media outlets. The regime's central goal is to secure international recognition for Bidzina Ivanishvili's authoritarian rule—and it has shown it will use any opening from Brussels to claim exactly that.

The EU has seen this play before. After the 2020 Parliamentary elections, it was European Council President Charles Michel who [brokered a deal](#) between the ruling party and the opposition. The Georgian Dream signed the agreement only to walk away from every commitment: no judicial reform, no electoral reform, no improvements in the rule of law, no power sharing, and no 43% barrier as a tripwire for the new parliamentary elections. Instead, the party used the façade of dialogue to consolidate power further and marginalize dissent.

If Brussels chooses to re-engage with Georgia, it must do so transparently, guided by a clear strategy, a well-defined timeline, and an accountability framework.

If Brussels chooses to re-engage with Georgia, it must do so transparently, guided by a clear strategy, a well-defined timeline, and an accountability framework. Unlike in 2021, when the EU lacked real leverage and was hesitant to use even what it had, today the EU possesses both meaningful carrots and sticks. Engagement must not be mistaken for endorsement.

The EU should tie any re-engagement to specific, measurable steps by the Georgian Dream, such as the release of political prisoners, the repeal of anti-democratic laws (including those targeting civil society and the media), and the organization of new, credible parliamentary elections to resolve the political crisis.

In exchange, the Georgian Dream government could receive:

- Restoration of official EU-Georgia formats;
- Recognition of legitimacy as a dialogue partner for Brussels;
- Partial unfreezing of suspended financial assistance;
- Gradual normalization of political relations with EU institutions.

These steps could reopen accession talks and grant Georgia access to previously unavailable programs like *Digital Europe*. Most importantly, they could revive EU interest in the Black Sea electricity cable, the renewed digital link with Georgia and the South Caucasus, as well as broader trade and economic connectivity via the Middle Corridor.

At the same time, the EU must make clear that failure to meet these conditions will carry serious consequences. These sticks could include:

- Coordinated EU sanctions on all Members of Parliament who voted for repressive laws, following the model already used by several member states;
- Coordinated sanctions on Mr. Ivanishvili and his enablers, including the propaganda industry and the businesses that sustain the Georgian Dream;
- The initiation of formal infringement procedures for violations of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA)—especially articles relating to civil society engagement, the rule of law, and democratic governance;
- A policy statement that the EU will not abide by the restrictive legislation violating the freedom of assembly and restricting the work of the country's vibrant civil society.

A coalition of willing EU member states could form a Contact Group on Georgia to monitor the situation, coordinate pressure, and offer mediation, ensuring that engagement is principled rather than passive.

Finally, a coalition of willing EU member states could form a Contact Group on Georgia to monitor the situation, coordinate pressure, and offer media-

tion, ensuring that engagement is principled rather than passive. As the ECFR [suggested](#) in a recent policy recommendation, the Weimar Three (Germany, France, and Poland) could play a pivotal role in the new mediation.

This two-track approach—conditional incentives paired with enforceable red lines—offers Brussels its best chance to reassert influence in Georgia without legitimizing authoritarianism ■

Boiling Point Across the Atlantic: How Georgia Is Cutting the Branch It Sits On

Previous editions of this journal have thoroughly [documented](#) how the Georgian Dream regime has rapidly consolidated authoritarian control, capturing all levers of power within the country. This state capture has extended across all branches of government, encompassed key economic and financial assets, and ensured near-total dominance over the information space. Crucially, this transformation has not been driven by domestic forces alone; as previously [discussed](#), it has been heavily influenced—and in many ways enabled—by strategies conceived not in Tbilisi but in Moscow. Obviously, Russia's clear objective is to maintain a loyal proxy regime in Georgia for as long as possible.

This reality raises an essential question for NATO and other Western partners: if Georgia holds no

strategic significance, why have allied countries invested billions of taxpayer dollars into its development over the years? And if Georgia does matter, why are these same allies passively allowing Russia to reverse the country's democratic and Euro-Atlantic progress? This contradiction demands serious and urgent reflection.

This article seeks to evaluate the current state of NATO–Georgia relations. Are these ties continuing to unravel? Is anyone taking decisive steps to confront the errors and neglect that brought Georgia to this point? And, most importantly, are NATO–Georgia relations irreparably broken, or is there still a chance to revive the country's Euro-Atlantic path?



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NATO at a Crossroads: Challenges in a Fractured Security Environment

To address the critical questions surrounding NATO–Georgia relations, one must first grasp NATO’s current priorities and the internal debates shaping its strategic outlook. The Alliance is operating in the most volatile security landscape since the end of the Cold War. The transatlantic bond, long the cornerstone of NATO’s collective defense, now faces growing pressure from both internal divisions and external challenges.

As EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Kaja Kallas [observed](#) at the 2025 *Lennart Meri Conference*, Europe has entered what she termed an “acceptance phase” with the United States. While American commitment remains—for now—there are increasing indications that Europe must brace

for a future with a less predictable U.S. role and limited time to adapt.

NATO was never designed to confront the kind of internal tensions it now faces.

NATO was never designed to confront the kind of internal tensions it now faces. The Alliance has proven highly effective in deterring external adversaries and managing conventional threats but it struggles to respond to internal discord, whether it is Hungary’s persistent obstructionism or ambiguous U.S. messaging on issues like Greenland. The unity that once served as NATO’s greatest strength now highlights its institutional vulnerabilities in managing crises from within. Compounding this is the fact that NATO’s structure was built for deterrence, prevention, and out-of-area missions, not for sustained warfare or direct territorial defense. This raises pressing concerns about the Alliance’s

preparedness as the security environment continues to deteriorate.

Recent high-level meetings, including the Antalya gathering of foreign ministers, have [underscored](#) a broad consensus on the need to increase defense spending, boost industrial capacity, and place resilience at the heart of NATO's strategy. But the urgency is unmistakable: Europe must not only spend more but spend smarter, ensuring that investments translate into real capabilities when they are needed, not years down the line. These priorities will be central to the agenda of the upcoming NATO summit in the Hague in June 2025.

At the same time, Russia's military, although [far less resourced](#) than the combined forces of Europe, continues to pose an existential threat through its effective use of both conventional and hybrid tactics aimed at undermining the cohesion and stability of the Alliance.

In response, resilience has emerged as the new frontline of transatlantic security. Building it [requires](#) a coordinated effort across governments, the private sector, and civil society. Each must play a role in safeguarding critical infrastructure, combating disinformation, and preparing populations for the realities of modern conflict. The psychological domain remains particularly vulnerable as adversaries exploit cognitive weaknesses and sow division through increasingly sophisticated information operations. Russia's tactics, [honed](#) first in Georgia and now deployed across Europe, demonstrate that the battle for hearts and minds is no less decisive than traditional military confrontation.

NATO's true strength lies not only in deterring conventional threats but also in its ability to learn from past failures and cultivate the resilience needed to face the complexities of hybrid warfare.

Ultimately, NATO's true strength lies not only in deterring conventional threats but also in its ability to learn from past failures and cultivate the resilience needed to face the complexities of hybrid warfare. A challenging but necessary truth is that few within NATO's leadership circles openly acknowledge that Georgia's current democratic backsliding is, in large part, a consequence of the Alliance's [inaction](#). Fewer still are willing to admit that Georgia's deepening slide into Russia's orbit represents not just a national issue but a strategic challenge for NATO itself.

Even more troubling is that current trends in Euro-Atlantic geopolitical discourse [suggest](#) a growing risk that the same mistakes will be repeated with Ukraine. A telling example was the [debate](#) among Allies over whether to invite Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the Hague summit. This dispute exposed internal fractures and signaled wavering resolve at a moment when unity is essential for the future of Europe. Although Zelenskyy was [ultimately](#) invited, the lingering sense of disunity left a troubling aftertaste.

The [experiences](#) of Ukraine, Finland, and Sweden illustrate that societal resilience—the willingness and capacity of citizens to defend their country both physically and psychologically—is as essential as military hardware. Finland's example shows that recognizing a threat is only the beginning; without clear communication and preparedness, public morale can erode rapidly as it did in Georgia.

What we are [witnessing](#) in Georgia today is a textbook case of what Sergei Rastorguev described as the ultimate aim of information warfare: to make an adversary abandon its defenses voluntarily by instilling fear and helplessness through overwhelming cognitive operations. Taken together, the lessons, both positive and negative, point to one crucial insight: if Ukrainians begin to lose hope, their ability to withstand Russia's relentless assault will be gravely weakened.

Georgia: From Accession Aspirations to Footnote

The trajectory of security in the Black Sea region starkly illustrates the consequences of NATO's broader strategic challenges. A decade ago, the region included three firm Allies and two promising aspirants. Today, Türkiye has become a difficult ally, Romania and Bulgaria face massive hybrid assaults, Ukraine is at war, and Georgia is governed by Kremlin proxies. Once the model aspirant for NATO's open-door policy, Georgia was singled out in the [2014 Secretary General's report](#) for its "European path" and was promised substantial support to prepare for membership.

That optimism has since vanished. [The 2024 report](#) mentions Georgia only in passing, stripped of future perspectives. What was once a symbol of NATO's eastward ambition has been reduced to a footnote—still involved in joint exercises, but politically sidelined. This reflects not only deteriorating NATO-Georgia relations but also the Alliance's broader retreat from enlargement and strategic uncertainty on its eastern flank.

Over the past decade, NATO-Georgia cooperation has continued through the [Substantial NATO-Georgia Package](#) (SNGP), which encompasses 13 initiatives spanning medical support, language training, and defense standardization. Centers like JTEC have facilitated joint exercises and contributed to the modernization of Georgia's military. NATO has also supported governance reforms through the [Building Integrity Program](#). Yet these efforts increasingly run on inertia, undermined by Georgia's political ambivalence and the shifting regional environment.

Political ties, however, have weakened significantly. The last high-level NATO-Georgia Commission [meeting](#) took place in 2019. Since then, Georgia's presence in NATO forums has dwindled and en-

gagement has shifted from strategic partnership to technical cooperation. This decline parallels a broader political shift within Georgia itself. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Georgian Dream government has embraced increasingly anti-Western rhetoric and scaled back democratic reforms, [alarming](#) NATO allies and eroding trust.

Statements by former Prime Minister Garibashvili [blaming](#) NATO for the war in Ukraine, along with Georgia's [absence](#) from recent NATO summits, clearly signaled a shift away from Euro-Atlantic integration. His successor, Mr. Kobakhidze, has further deepened this trajectory, overseeing the dismissal of pro-Western civil servants, reducing the size of Georgia's NATO diplomatic mission, and dismantling key institutions supporting Euro-Atlantic cooperation. Most notably, the Information Center on NATO and the EU—a long-standing state-backed agency dedicated to raising public awareness about Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations—was formally [shut down](#) in June 2025.

Today, NATO-Georgia relations exist in a paradox: continued technical cooperation amid political disengagement and strategic drift.

Today, NATO-Georgia relations exist in a [paradox](#): continued technical cooperation amid political disengagement and strategic drift. Years of partnership have built solid defense capabilities and interoperability, but these achievements are now overshadowed by declining political will and Georgia's pivot toward a more Russia-accommodating posture. If this continues, Georgia even risks disappearing from NATO's periphery.

While the Georgian Dream regime bears responsibility for halting Georgia's NATO ambitions, the absence of a Membership Action Plan and the geopolitical pressure from Russia have constrained

the Alliance as well. Without renewed reforms and political alignment with NATO values, Georgia's path to membership remains blocked, leaving it exposed in a volatile security environment.

[Exploiting](#) this strategic “grey zone,” Russia has employed hybrid warfare to subdue Georgia and is waging a grinding war of [attrition](#) against Ukraine, aiming for a comparable result. The sobering reality is that Moscow's gamble has largely succeeded. Instead of drawing closer to NATO, both countries have seen their membership [prospects](#) recede, along with the broader vision of a stable and integrated Black Sea region. Each time a senior American official declares that NATO membership for Ukraine is off the table, the Kremlin is further emboldened, reassured that its aggressive tactics have been both practical and rewarding.

Georgia's Existential Security Dilemma and the Path Forward

Georgia now faces an existential security dilemma. With limited military capacity, [ranking](#) 94th globally, it remains highly vulnerable without strong defense and security support from NATO and its Allies. While the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package offers vital assistance, it cannot substitute for the protection provided by full NATO membership or sustained Allied backing.

Without close cooperation with NATO and its member states, the survival and effectiveness of Georgia's armed forces are simply impossible. Georgia [lacks](#) the self-sufficient resources—be it modern equipment, advanced training, or technological know-how—to independently sustain a capable and modern military. For years, NATO and its allies have provided the essential support, supplying uniforms, weapons, and, crucially, high-standard training and education that have enabled the Georgian military to reach and maintain international standards. If these ties are severed, there is

no realistic alternative—no other partners are willing or able to fill this gap. The idea that non-NATO states like Iran, Russia, or China could substitute for this support is not only unrealistic but dangerous, as none of these countries has any interest in strengthening Georgia's defense; in fact, their interests are often directly opposed.

Moreover, the very foundation of Georgia's defense readiness is interoperability with NATO. This is not just about having compatible equipment, but about sharing doctrines, participating in joint exercises, and being part of a security culture that prioritizes accountability and professionalism. As recent years have shown, when cooperation with NATO is weakened, Georgia's military quickly loses access to vital resources, cutting-edge training, and the collective expertise that underpins its operational effectiveness. In short, without close and active relations with NATO and the Allies, Georgia's armed forces would not only stagnate—they would face a rapid decline, leaving the country exposed and vulnerable in an increasingly dangerous region.

Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, its rejection of ceasefires, and its resistance to peace talks have [reaffirmed](#) a hard truth: democratic states near Russia cannot survive without credible security guarantees. Georgia's internal resources and regional partnerships are no match for Moscow's hybrid tactics, military superiority, and regional influence. Without deeper NATO cooperation, Georgia risks isolation and diminished sovereignty in a volatile security environment.

Democratic states near Russia cannot survive without credible security guarantees.

The pressing question is: what can be done—and by whom? In a country governed by a pro-Russian regime, Georgia's pro-Western society and politi-

cal opposition must step up. A unified opposition could formally request a meeting with the North Atlantic Council at the ambassadorial level to present a clear vision for democratic renewal and outline how NATO can help. Now more than ever, NATO needs a reliable partner, and Georgia needs a credible alternative to its ruling regime.

Civil society must also act decisively. Beyond short-term campaigns, it should lead long-term public diplomacy efforts to counter government propaganda. Engaging forums like NATO Engages and advocating for a Black Sea-focused session at the margins of NATO summits would allow Georgia to share its firsthand [experience](#) with hybrid threats, offering lessons relevant to the entire Alliance.

NATO, for its part, must navigate skillfully across the nuanced border between two dangerous scenarios: normalizing relations with the ruling regime or isolating Georgia from the Euro-Atlantic security arrangements. There is a golden middle to avoid these two scenarios. NATO should take a strong stance against the regime's authoritarian policies and, at the same time, enhance relations with the pro-democracy stakeholders in Georgia. NATO must also welcome engagement from pro-democracy actors and remove bureaucratic barriers that obstruct cooperation.

Western hesitation created a strategic vacuum that Russia eagerly exploited: first in Georgia, then in Crimea, and ultimately in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Did NATO miss a historic opportunity by not offering Georgia and Ukraine a clear path to membership at the 2008 Bucharest Summit? Perhaps. What is beyond doubt is that Western hesitation created a strategic vacuum that Russia eagerly exploited: first in Georgia, then in Crimea, and ultimately in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Reflecting on this, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz recently [stated](#) that the war in Ukraine might have been avoided if the country had joined NATO in 2008.

Georgia was once seen as the gateway to Ukraine; today, Ukraine is the keystone of European security, and their fates remain intertwined through the shared security architecture of the Black Sea.

This geopolitical turbulence has laid bare the cost of delay, but it also created a window of opportunity that Georgia cannot afford to miss. Georgia was once seen as the gateway to Ukraine; today, Ukraine is the keystone of European security, and their fates remain intertwined through the shared security architecture of the Black Sea. Integrating both countries into European and Euro-Atlantic structures is no longer just a strategic option — it is a prerequisite for lasting peace and stability in Europe ■

Corridors of Power: How Connectivity Becomes the New Battleground in the South Caucasus

The post-2020 period was hailed as a turning point for the South Caucasus – a moment when Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia could shape their regional agenda without the overbearing weight of Russia's influence. Moscow's preoccupation with Ukraine, Armenia's pivot away from its traditional alliances, and Azerbaijan's ascendancy following its military victories seemed to enable a rare experiment in self-directed diplomacy.

Moreover, the EU's 2023 decision to grant Georgia candidate status, along with intensified discussions on shared economic interests – including Black Sea connectivity, the revived Anaklia port project, the prospective undersea electricity cable, and proposals for enhanced digital links through a new submarine internet cable (complementing the

existing one) or even space-based communication – have, on paper, created promising opportunities for new forms of regional integration. Notably, all of this has emerged without Moscow's dominance.

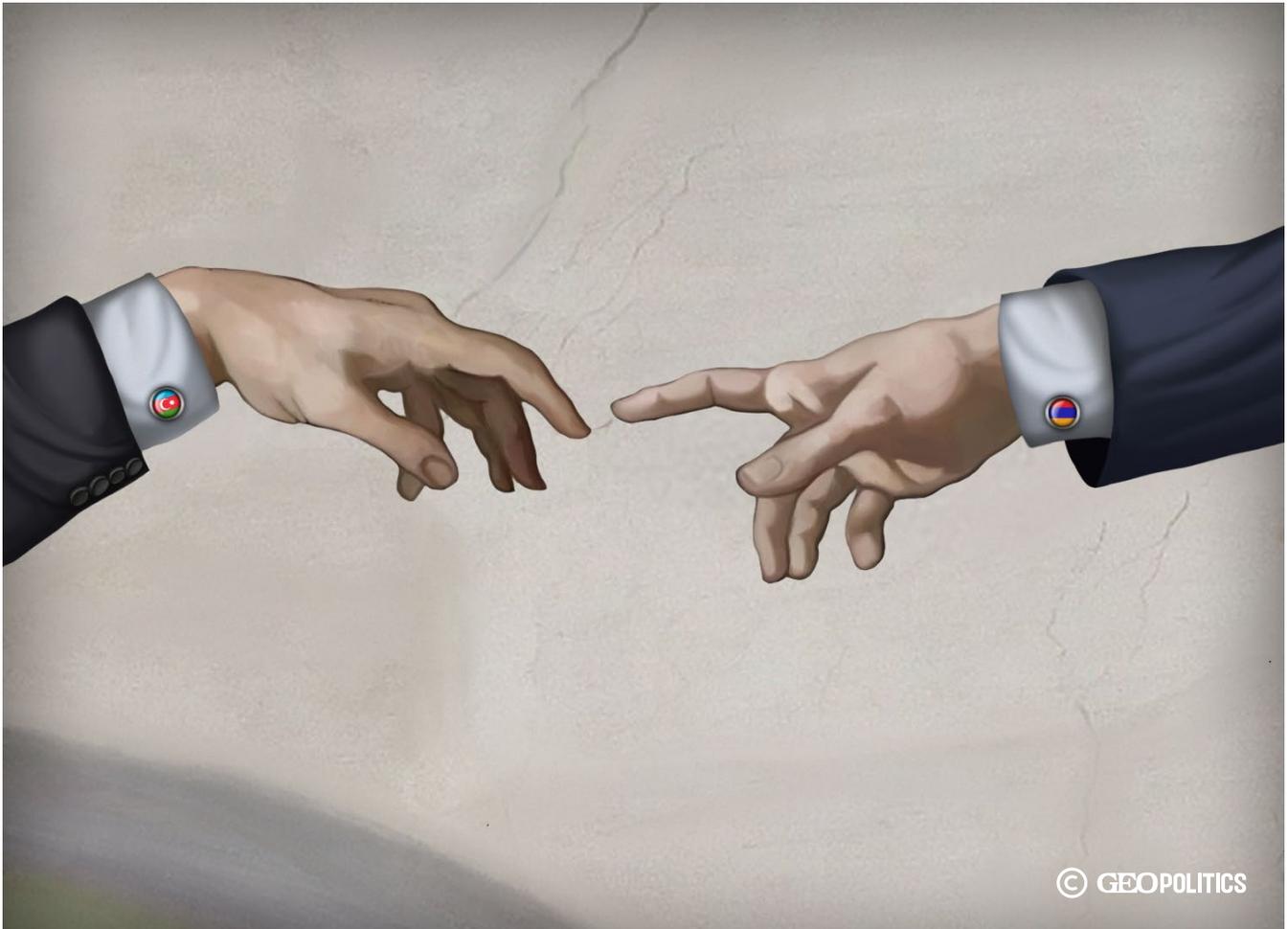
Russia's influence has not vanished; it has metastasized. In Georgia, the government's authoritarian drift has followed a distinctly Russian script, reinforced by the passage of repressive laws, election manipulation, and a crackdown on the opposition, civil society, and free media.

However, by 2025, this illusion of autonomy is already unraveling. Russia's influence has not vanished; it has metastasized. In Georgia, the government's authoritarian drift has followed a distinctly



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Russian script, reinforced by the passage of repressive laws, election manipulation, and a crackdown on the opposition, civil society, and free media. In Armenia, the internal backlash to peace negotiations, led by pro-Russian actors, has destabilized Nikol Pashinyan's position. Russia's peacekeepers may have left Nagorno-Karabakh, but their shadow still lingers.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan and Türkiye have emerged as the dominant axis of regional power. Baku's military triumphs and Türkiye's strategic assertiveness have created a duo that actively reshapes regional dynamics, not through multilateralism but through strategic imposition. The bilateralization of Armenia-Azerbaijan talks, Azerbaijan's rejection of international mediation, and the sidelining of the EU and the U.S. reflect this shift. The Trump administration's lack of interest in the region and its economic potential adds to the vacuum, rein-

forcing the perception that Western actors are either absent or irrelevant in shaping the future of the South Caucasus. In this environment, Azerbaijan and Türkiye are not just filling a gap; they are redrawing the map to serve their strategic vision.

What initially appeared as a window for regional agency has morphed into a landscape of growing asymmetry where power, not consensus, sets the rules. In this new reality, connectivity is no longer a pathway to peace and prosperity but a strategic instrument of leverage and control.

Connectivity as a Tool of Leverage

The new era of South Caucasian diplomacy is defined by infrastructure, but not as a bridge of peace. Corridors are now symbols of sovereignty,

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The new era of South Caucasian diplomacy is defined by infrastructure, but not as a bridge of peace. Corridors are now symbols of sovereignty, tools of coercion, and prizes in the contest for regional dominance.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of the so-called Zangezur (or Syunik) Corridor proposed by Azerbaijan as a land link to Nakhchivan, potentially opening the north-south and east-west trade routes through Azerbaijan. Baku's maximalist push – demanding extraterritorial access policed by the Russian FSB through the Zangezur corridor – transformed a technical project into a strategic threat to Armenian sovereignty. President Aliyev's [rhetoric](#) that “the Zangezur Corridor will definitely be opened, whether Armenia wants it or not” left little doubt. This puts Armenia in a conundrum – agree by coercion or resist and risk another territorial conflict. Neither seems a viable option at this stage.

Armenia's [counterproposal](#), the “Crossroads of Peace,” envisions mutual access, reciprocal sovereignty, and multilateral guarantees. But in a power-asymmetrical environment, such ideas remain aspirational. Baku sees the corridor not just as a logistical route but as a final piece of the post-war puzzle – a physical and symbolic reunification with Nakhchivan, bolstering Aliyev's domestic and regional stature.

Even Georgia, once the default hub of east-west trade, is at risk of marginalization. A parallel branch of the Middle Corridor through Armenia could divert freight and investment, especially if geopolitical instability or Western distrust persists. With Anaklia's future uncertain and Russian naval build-up in Ochamchire threatening Black Sea access,

Georgia's transit potential is under siege by both domestic choices and external constraints.

The Anaklia deep-sea port, as detailed elsewhere in this issue, remains far from completion. The Georgian government's [decision](#) to award the project to a sanctioned Chinese company has yet to be implemented. Nearly a decade has been lost – first to the ruling party's deliberate [sabotage](#) of the project for geopolitical and political reasons and later to its half-hearted revival efforts aimed at avoiding friction with Russia, the U.S., or China – an impossible balancing act. Today, it appears that the Georgian Dream, more focused on preserving and legitimizing its rule than on strategic development, treats Anaklia less as a national priority and more as a bargaining chip to gain favor with external actors willing to support the regime.

Meanwhile, Iran and Russia are anchoring the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as their geo-economic lifeline. For Tehran, the corridor is a strategic hedge against sanctions and isolation. For Moscow, it is a sanctions-proof artery to Asia – one that bypasses the West and consolidates influence through logistics.

Connectivity, once promoted as a shared opportunity, now resembles a zero-sum game. If the post-2020 dream was connectivity as cooperation, the reality has become connectivity as coercion.

Corridors of Contestation

What unites the strategies of various regional actors is not cooperation but competition. And what is at stake is not only trade routes and connectivity-related proposals but regional order.

Ambitions are crisscrossing the South Caucasus: Azerbaijan's Middle Corridor, Iran's INSTC, Armenia's multilateral vision, Russia's push for oversight

and control, Türkiye's pan-Turkic goals, and Georgia's balancing act tilting towards Moscow and mainly preoccupied with the regime's survival. With the EU and the U.S. all but absent from the geopolitical discussions, the connectivity, defined by each actor on its terms, becomes a harder-to-reach goal. What unites the strategies of various regional actors is not cooperation but competition. And what is at stake is not only trade routes and connectivity-related proposals but regional order.

Azerbaijan and Türkiye are building an axis that ties transport to territorial influence. Baku's integration into energy and freight networks — from the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline — underpins its leadership in the Organization of Turkic States. The Zangezur Corridor would seal this hegemony.

Armenia, meanwhile, faces contradictory imperatives. It seeks normalization with Azerbaijan and Türkiye to break out of isolation, yet fears that ceding control over corridors could compromise sovereignty. Its push to get rid of Russian presence and reengage with the EU through more common initiatives, such as visa liberalization or an updated Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership [Agreement](#), signals a strategic shift, but economic dependence on Russia and energy reliance limit its room for maneuver.

Having lost formal security footholds in Armenia — symbolized by the withdrawal of peacekeepers from Nagorno-Karabakh, the [expulsion](#) of Russian border guards from Zvartnots Airport, and Yerevan's de facto [departure](#) from the CSTO — Russia is now seeking indirect means to retain strategic leverage in the South Caucasus. Chief among them is corridor control.

Moscow's interest in overseeing the Zangezur Corridor — the proposed transit route linking Azerbaijan proper to Nakhchivan through Armenia's

Syunik province — is not only about ensuring safe passage for freight. It is about reasserting itself as an indispensable regional player. Article 9 of the 2020 ceasefire [agreement](#), which vaguely refers to the unblocking of all economic and transport links and “unimpeded movement,” has been used by both Baku and Moscow to push for Russian Federal Security Service oversight of the corridor. This would allow Russia to insert itself into east-west connectivity projects that are increasingly bypassing its territory, especially the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor.

Moscow's interest in overseeing the Zangezur Corridor — the proposed transit route linking Azerbaijan proper to Nakhchivan through Armenia's Syunik province — is not only about ensuring safe passage for freight. It is about reasserting itself as an indispensable regional player.

In geopolitical terms, the corridor presents Russia with a twofold opportunity: first, to act as a gatekeeper in the trade infrastructure of the South Caucasus without requiring direct territorial control; second, to secure routes that facilitate sanctions evasion, particularly in sectors such as energy, dual-use goods, and strategic materials. The Baku-Dagestan-Russia corridor, especially via the Yarag-Kazmalyar crossing, already [provides](#) a logistical alternative to the increasingly scrutinized Verkhny Lars route.

Furthermore, by insisting on security oversight, rather than economic partnership, Russia can retain relevance even during the economic decline. This explains its rejection of alternative oversight proposals, such as Swiss or international monitoring forces for Zangezur. Control, not commerce, is the goal.

Russia's corridor obsession reflects a deeper strategic adaptation: from peacekeeper to chokepoint manager, ensuring continued influence by physically embedding itself in the region's arteries of trade.

In sum, Russia's corridor obsession reflects a deeper strategic adaptation: from peacekeeper to chokepoint manager, ensuring continued influence by physically embedding itself in the region's arteries of trade.

Iran's position on connectivity in the South Caucasus is driven not by economic calculus alone but by existential strategic concerns. With regional adversaries encroaching, particularly Türkiye and Israel-backed Azerbaijan, Tehran views land corridors through Armenia as geopolitical lifelines, essential to preventing encirclement and preserving access to critical trade routes.

Iran opposes the Zangezur Corridor proposal vehemently, viewing it as an attempt by Baku and Ankara to create a contiguous Turkic belt from Central Asia to the Mediterranean, cutting Iran off from the South Caucasus and reducing its leverage. Tehran's military leadership has repeatedly warned that any alteration of Armenia's borders is a red line. The 2023 uptick in joint Iranian-Armenian military contacts and Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian's [remarks](#) reaffirming Armenia's territorial integrity were signals of Iran's deep unease.

At the same time, Iran is doubling down on the International North-South Transport Corridor, which runs from India through Iranian ports like Bandar Abbas and Chabahar, up through Azerbaijan or Armenia, and into Russia. The INSTC is not only Iran's most promising trade corridor but also its most sanctions-resilient route, particularly after the U.S. withdrawal from the [Joint Compre-](#)

[hensive Plan of Action](#) (JCPOA) and Tehran's growing isolation from Western markets.

Iran's urgency increased following the Houthi disruptions in the Red Sea beginning in late 2023. Attacks on shipping by Iran-aligned militias made it clear that Tehran sees land corridors as alternatives to maritime chokepoints vulnerable to interdiction or conflict. Tehran's own officials have [promoted](#) the INSTC as a "safer alternative" to the Suez Canal and Russia has eagerly [supported](#) this framing.

Furthermore, Iran's economic cooperation with Russia has intensified in this context. The [completion](#) of the Rasht-Astara railway, a vital missing link, is now prioritized. Infrastructure coordination, financing through Iranian banks, and integration with Caspian Sea ports like Anzali reflect the regime's all-in investment in the INSTC vision.

For Tehran, therefore, the corridors through Armenia are not just trade routes. They are survival routes — essential for breaking out of diplomatic isolation, projecting regional relevance, and ensuring that Iran is not boxed in by a Turkic-NATO-Israeli arc to its north and west. If Trump-instigated negotiations on nuclear disarmament, especially with the participation of Russia, as Trump [hinted](#) in his tweet, succeed, Tehran's goal of boosting its role in regional connectivity could become a reality.

Georgia: From Strategic Hub to Connectivity Dead End?

Georgia, once the uncontested east-west transit hub of the South Caucasus, is at real risk of losing its centrality in the region's connectivity agenda. While it remains geographically pivotal — home to the Black Sea ports of Poti and Batumi, and a core component of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad, and the Middle Cor-

ridor — its political trajectory is casting serious doubt on its reliability as a partner for the West.

The revival of the Anaklia deep-sea port, long seen as Georgia's strategic gateway to Europe and Asia, remains mired in political stagnation. Despite renewed interest, the project has not progressed and the decision to award it to a sanctioned Chinese company has further complicated matters. The ruling Georgian Dream party [torpedoed](#) the original Anaklia Consortium, backed by Western investors, for political reasons, fearing that strategic infrastructure under Western control would provoke Russian ire. The jealousy towards the possible builders of the port, now opposition politicians from the Lelo party, could have also played a role.

Now, Georgia finds itself struggling to attract Western attention and investment, not for lack of opportunity but due to growing mistrust. The adoption of Russian-type anti-democratic laws since 2024, mass repression of protesters, and democratic backsliding have alarmed the EU and the U.S. alike. Washington has suspended the strategic partnership, the European Union has cut the financial aid and stopped high-level contacts, which inevitably affects the decisions of European and American companies to invest in a country drifting closer to Russia and China.

Meanwhile, Georgia's transit potential is also threatened by alternative routes. Should Armenia be integrated into east-west connectivity via Zangezur, and the Black Sea-Caspian traffic be rebalanced towards Azerbaijan-Dagestan, Georgia may face significant losses in freight traffic and customs revenues. The Zemo Lars crossing — vital for trade with Russia — could be eclipsed by Yarag-Kazmalyar if Moscow and Baku intensify cooperation.

Compounding the problem is the militarization of the Black Sea. Russia's expansion of its naval pres-

ence in Ochamchire, in Georgia's occupied Abkhazia, just 30 km from the proposed Anaklia port, is a strategic warning shot. It demonstrates that any attempt to turn Georgia into a Western trade hub will meet military pushback, further chilling investor enthusiasm.

In short, Georgia's fate in the connectivity game now hinges not on geography but on governance. Without clarity of foreign policy, firm democratic credentials, and strategic alignment with the West, it risks becoming a country with a prime location but no invitations — bypassed by partners and boxed in by neighbors.

Among the many corridors that could reshape the South Caucasus, one remains conspicuously closed — the railway and highway link connecting Russia to Georgia and onward to Armenia through Abkhazia. Once a key artery of Soviet-era logistics, the Sochi-Sokhumi-Zugdidi railway, which traverses the strategic Enguri River, has been dormant since the war in Abkhazia in 1992-1993. Its reopening, under different geopolitical circumstances, could have been transformative.

In a context where Georgia remained committed to its European integration path and aligned with EU sanctions policy against Russia, such a project — implemented with international oversight and under status-neutral arrangements — might have had merit. It could have served as a confidence-building measure, re-establishing cross-Enguri trade, reducing isolation in Abkhazia, and reconnecting the broader South Caucasus with northern markets. The Enguri River, currently a de facto border and chokepoint, could have been reframed as a gateway for regulated commerce.

The opportunity was not merely theoretical. In 2011, Georgia and Russia reached a landmark agreement brokered by Switzerland, clearing the way for Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). As part of the deal, the parties

[agreed](#) to establish an international monitoring mechanism for the movement of goods through the Abkhazia and South Ossetia corridors, involving a neutral private company — later identified as SGS (Société Générale de Surveillance) — to oversee the trade.

The agreement, while status-neutral and diplomatically significant, was never implemented by Georgia (or Russia). The GD Government avoided selecting the monitoring company, failed to build the necessary infrastructure, and allowed the agreement's political momentum to dissipate. This inertia was driven by fears of legitimizing Russian control over the occupied territories, internal political sensitivities, and a lack of vision. In hindsight, it was a missed strategic opening.

If implemented at the time, this arrangement could have served two purposes. It could have reinforced Georgia's image as a constructive regional actor capable of pragmatic engagement without compromising sovereignty. And it would have enabled Georgia to retain leverage over trade routes passing through its internationally recognized territory with clear monitoring and international backing.

Taken together with the Anaklia deep-sea port, Georgia could have become the anchor of a dual-transit strategy — east-west via the Middle Corridor and north-south via a status-neutral corridor through Abkhazia. But both cards were squandered. Georgian Dream sabotaged Anaklia and the WTO trade agreement was shelved.

Today, the idea of reopening the Russia-Georgia-Armenia rail link via Abkhazia is politically toxic. With Georgia's government under fire for democratic backsliding and passing the Kremlin-inspired restrictive laws, any attempt to revive the Abkhazia corridor would be seen as a capitulation to Moscow, both domestically and internationally.

Domestically, the public perception of the Georgian Dream as a pro-Russian force would be further entrenched. Activists and opposition figures would likely frame such a move as treasonous — a betrayal of Georgia's territorial integrity and Western orientation.

Internationally, neither the EU, the United States, nor Azerbaijan, which historically views Armenia's links to Russia with suspicion, would support a project that helps Russia bypass sanctions or strengthens Moscow's foothold in the region.

What might have been a strategic trump card a decade ago is now a non-starter, buried under the weight of Georgia's political drift, regional mistrust, and the changing nature of Russia's role in the South Caucasus.

In effect, Georgia's inaction has neutralized its leverage. By neither advancing the Anaklia project nor activating the WTO-brokered corridor through Abkhazia, it has ceded the initiative to others. Connectivity decisions that could have been made on Georgia's terms, backed by the West and tied to European integration, are now viewed through a very different lens — as potential tools for Russian circumvention, not Georgian leadership.

Integration or Fragmentation?

The recent Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process has opened a rare window for regional peacebuilding, and connectivity could be its most durable anchor. But for that to happen, corridors must be built not as tools of dominance but as frameworks of mutual benefit. So far, that vision remains elusive. The Zangezur Corridor continues to be framed by Azerbaijan in extraterritorial terms while Russia and Iran have co-opted the north-south axis for sanctions evasion and strategic maneuvering. Even the Middle Corridor, once hailed as a unifying route

from China to Europe, risks fragmentation into competing branches based on geopolitical loyalties rather than logistical efficiency.

Tbilisi has squandered two potential game-changers: the Anaklia deep-sea port, which could have anchored Georgia as a Black Sea hub, and the WTO-brokered trade corridor through the occupied regions, which could have restored leverage over Russia while promoting status-neutral engagement.

The problem is not a lack of opportunity but a failure of political will, particularly in Georgia, but also in almost all regional powers. Tbilisi has squandered two potential game-changers: the Anaklia deep-sea port, which could have anchored Georgia as a Black Sea hub, and the WTO-brokered trade corridor through the occupied regions, which could have restored leverage over Russia while promot-

ing status-neutral engagement. Both remain dormant. Instead of utilizing connectivity to reinforce sovereignty and regional agency, Georgia's ruling party has opted for a path of appeasement, aligning itself with Russian interests at the expense of public trust, strategic autonomy, and Western support. What could have been built as a shield against authoritarian influence is now seen as a potential conduit for it.

The result is a new era of connectivity traps — corridors that promise integration but deliver dependence, routes that bind rather than bridge. For the wider region, this means more fragmentation, more suspicion, and fewer platforms for inclusive cooperation. For Georgia, it means the gradual erosion of its transit centrality and geopolitical credibility. Unless the region redefines connectivity not as a race for control but as a vehicle for coexistence, it risks turning infrastructure into the next frontier of rivalry — and losing peace just as it comes into view ■

Anaklia's Strategic Gamble: Will Washington's New Maritime Strategy Matter?

President Trump's [establishment](#) of the White House shipbuilding office and the U.S. senators' recent introduction of the [Strategic Ports Reporting Act](#) herald a major shift in the United States' maritime strategy, where control over naval power, shipbuilding, and strategic ports becomes a central pillar of U.S. national security. While the shipbuilding office aims to deter China's maritime buildup and reshape global shipping, the Strategic Ports Reporting Act intends to counter China's expanding control over strategic ports worldwide. The bill explicitly targets China's efforts to build, acquire, or control strategic maritime infrastructure worldwide, while securing trade routes, protecting critical chokepoints, and gaining access to lucrative markets.

In these circumstances, the Anaklia deep-sea port on Georgia's Black Sea coast, caught in China's

grip, is a significant but often overlooked strategic asset that aligns with U.S. economic, security, and geopolitical interests. As the U.S. formulates its global maritime strategy and defines its approach towards greater Eurasia, Georgia's deep-sea port in Anaklia offers an opportunity to deter strategic adversaries - Russia, China, and Iran - reshape regional trade networks, and embrace attractive business opportunities while enhancing connectivity with resource-rich Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

A Geopolitical and Economic Opportunity

Strategically located, Anaklia is poised to become the only deep-sea port in Georgia, capable of handling large cargo vessels that currently bypass



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Guest Contributor

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the country for ports in Türkiye or Russia. More importantly, the deep-sea port will enhance the goods handling capacity of the Trans-Caspian International Transportation Route (TITR), a strategic land trade route linking Europe with Central Asia and China via Georgia, known as the Middle Corridor.

It is worth noting that cargo shipments along the Middle Corridor have increased dramatically in recent years. It is widely anticipated that shipments will [rise](#) to 10 million tons annually by 2030, creating significant trade and investment opportunities for the United States and its European allies. Once operational, the Anaklia port will [provide](#) the nearest access to the South Caucasus (17 million people) and serve as a crucial maritime hub for landlocked nations such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Moreover, it will enhance connectivity for the North and South Caucasus, as well as Anatolia, collectively home to 180 million people.

Sino-Georgian cooperation on the Anaklia port project is still in its early stages of development, leaving room for maneuvering and potential course corrections.

As the United States and the EU intend to reduce their dependence on supply chains dominated by China and trade infrastructure controlled by Russia, the Georgian deep-sea port presents a secure, reliable, and Western-aligned alternative, facilitating faster and more predictable cargo transit between the Middle East, the EU, Central Asia and China bypassing Russian trade routes and infrastructure. It is worth noting that Sino-Georgian cooperation on the Anaklia port project is still in its early stages of development, leaving room for maneuvering and potential course corrections.

A Counterweight to Adversaries

In recent years, Beijing, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has invested heavily in physical and

digital infrastructure projects across Eurasia, increasing its geopolitical footprint and tightening its grip on strategic infrastructure, including Anaklia. Although Trump's first administration [raised](#) concerns about China's involvement in the Anaklia deep-sea port project in 2019, Georgia's ruling party proceeded with the deal, allowing Chinese state-backed companies to invest in the project. [The China Harbor Engineering Company](#), a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Co., [blacklisted](#) by the U.S. Department of Commerce and [sanctioned](#) by Bangladesh in 2018, was awarded the contract to develop the project in Anaklia in collaboration with a Chinese-Singaporean consortium. Despite a well-documented history of illicit practices and fraudulent activities, the Georgian government has not hesitated in partnering with these highly controversial Chinese business enterprises, raising serious concerns about transparency, corruption, and the country's strategic orientation.

While China's control of the Anaklia port leaves Georgia increasingly vulnerable and dependent on Beijing's economic might and authoritarian decision-making, it also poses a threat to the U.S. and the EU's security in the wider Black Sea region. China's growing network of seaports is an integral part of the BRI, serving a broad range of strategic purposes beyond commercial trade. These multi-purpose facilities, can serve as key military outposts, enabling the rapid deployment of military assets while allowing for enhanced global reach and force projection.

The Chinese-operated Anaklia port offers Beijing a valuable vantage point for observing NATO's naval movements and maritime activities in the Black Sea region, posing threats to Euro-Atlantic security.

In addition to their military utility, Chinese-con-

trolled ports play a significant role in intelligence gathering and surveillance activities. China's communications and monitoring infrastructure, often installed under the guise of port security or logistics management, can facilitate electronic intelligence collection. Consequently, the Chinese-operated Anaklia port offers Beijing a valuable vantage point for observing NATO's naval movements and maritime activities in the Black Sea region, posing threats to Euro-Atlantic security.

Washington's growing efforts, manifested in the Strategic Ports Reporting Act, to successfully safeguard critical ports, secure supply chains, protect transatlantic security, and stand up to China's growing global influence, will require the U.S. to get involved in the development of the Anaklia deep-sea port.

U.S. strategic interests and possibly even investments in Anaklia can counter China's growing influence in the region. With American and European political backing, Anaklia has excellent potential to develop into a central regional trade hub, curbing China's geopolitical clout and its economic dominance in the region. U.S. involvement can also offer a viable alternative to China's maritime and developmental architecture, reshaping trading routes and strategic infrastructures that criss-cross greater Eurasia.

Moreover, greater Western involvement in Anaklia will reduce Moscow's leverage and diminish its influence over regional commerce. In the past three decades, the Kremlin has effectively used its strategic influence over trade routes to exert pressure on neighboring states, reshaping the region's geopolitical landscape. The American-invested and developed strategic infrastructure and connectivity network can deter Russian aggression, strengthen Georgia's sovereignty, and reinforce democratic processes in the region while pushing East-West commerce and trade away from Russia

to alternative routes, reshaping trading networks, and advancing economic integration along the Middle Corridor.

A Gateway to Central Asia

By providing direct access to Black Sea shipping lanes, Anaklia can serve as a vital hub for Central Asian goods, exporting energy resources, uranium, rare earth minerals, industrial goods, and agricultural products to the EU, the Middle East, and beyond.

The Anaklia port represents a strategic gateway to landlocked countries in Central Asia. With abundant natural resources and a growing need for diversified trade routes, Central Asia will gain significantly from the development of the Anaklia port, which will be independent of Russia and China. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have been investing heavily in exploring alternatives to Russian-dominated transport networks. By providing direct access to Black Sea shipping lanes, Anaklia can serve as a vital hub for Central Asian goods, exporting energy resources, uranium, rare earth minerals, industrial goods, and agricultural products to the EU, the Middle East, and beyond.

The Europeans have already taken steps to secure their interest in the region. The Anaklia deep-sea port also directly aligns with the European Union's [Global Gateway initiative](#), which aims to build sustainable, trusted infrastructure across the world while reducing dependency on China's Belt and Road Initiative. As part of its commitment to the region, the EU has [pledged](#) a EUR 12 billion assistance package to Central Asia, with EUR 3 billion specifically allocated to the transport sector. This significant investment package highlights Brussels' strategic intent to bolster the Middle Corridor.

dor. Anaklia, can serve as the maritime anchor of this corridor, enhancing the EU's connectivity, resilience, and trade security.

The deeper engagement of the United States in Central Asia and the South Caucasus with European allies could reshape the regional power balance, enhance, and, to a certain extent, ensure the region's security, stability, and economic advancement while reducing their reliance on Russian and Chinese security and geo-economic structures. Furthermore, greater U.S. involvement in the region, in close cooperation with the EU, can strengthen the sovereignty of local actors while unlocking lucrative business opportunities for American and European business enterprises.

Securing U.S. Interests

The Anaklia deep-sea port [represents](#) a not-to-be-missed opportunity for the U.S. and its European allies to reshape connectivity, re-establish trade routes, and increase their footprint in the region. It is essential to consider that any ceasefire or peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine will likely be temporary, and Europe's relationship with Russia will remain strained in the long term. This will make trade with China through Russian routes risky and unviable, shifting focus to other trade routes along the Middle Corridor. Furthermore, amid a potential U.S.-China conflict in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing is expected to bolster its use of the Middle Corridor and potentially the Anaklia deep-sea port to preserve its access to the European market.

In a region where Russian naval activity has intensified and Chinese economic interests are expanding, Anaklia offers the U.S. a rare opportunity to anchor a long-term maritime and strategic presence on the Eastern edge of Europe.

By supporting the development of the Anaklia port, the United States can strengthen its strategic presence in the Black Sea—an increasingly contested zone between NATO, Russia, and China. The port could complement NATO's eastward posture, enabling the U.S. and its allies to project power more efficiently, support regional allies like Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria, and establish logistics hubs for defense and humanitarian operations. In a region where Russian naval activity has intensified and Chinese economic interests are expanding, Anaklia offers the U.S. a rare opportunity to anchor a long-term maritime and strategic presence on the Eastern edge of Europe.

The COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions have exposed the vulnerabilities in global supply chains, particularly those dependent on Chinese or Russian-controlled corridors. By investing in Anaklia, the U.S. can diversify and secure alternative supply chains through the Middle Corridor, linking Central Asia and Europe without crossing Russian territory. This shift will reduce the risks of coercive leverage over Western markets and industries, especially in critical sectors such as rare earth elements, energy, and agriculture, thereby enhancing the strategic resilience of the U.S. and allied economies.

The Anaklia project also presents a unique opportunity to encourage American private sector engagement in a high-potential, emerging market. With proper U.S. government backing and risk mitigation tools, American companies specializing in logistics, construction, digital infrastructure, and energy can gain a first-mover advantage in the region. This will not only generate jobs and economic returns but also promote U.S. business standards, innovation, and technological leadership in Eurasia. It aligns with the Trump administration's broader goal of promoting market-oriented development and countering state-led models advanced by China and Russia.

A major American-backed strategic infrastructure project like the Anaklia deep-sea port can also signal a strong commitment to democratic development in Georgia and the broader region. At a time when authoritarian regimes, such as China, are using their economic might, financial investments, and technological prowess to exert political influence, the U.S. can use the Anaklia project as a model for transparent, accountable, and sustainable development. The greater engagement of the United States in Georgia can empower reformist forces within the country, strengthen the rule of law, and counteract the creeping influence of authoritarian governance promoted by Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran. As a democratic partner on Europe's eastern frontier, Georgia's success will serve as a beacon for other aspiring democracies in the South Caucasus and greater Eurasia.

As global enthusiasm for China's Belt and Road Initiative wanes—and with Panama's bold decision to [withdraw](#)—the United States should adopt a similar stance regarding Georgia's Anaklia port. This moment offers a strategic opportunity to support Georgia's disengagement from the BRI while simultaneously investing in Anaklia's development. By strengthening maritime security and modernizing port infrastructure, the U.S. can help position Anaklia as a key gateway for Western trade. To achieve this, Washington must coordinate with international financial institutions, the private sector, and European allies to firmly anchor Anaklia within a Western-led framework of connectivity.

The port's success will serve as a model for how transatlantic coordination can deliver tangible results, reinforcing shared goals such as democratic governance, open markets, and secure infrastructure.

Anaklia provides a unique opportunity for deeper U.S.-EU cooperation in Eurasia, combining Ameri-

can strategic investments with European financial and policy tools. Through coordinated support—from the U.S. maritime strategy to the EU's Global Gateway initiative—both sides can pool resources, expertise, and diplomatic influence to reshape regional connectivity and trade. The port's success will serve as a model for how transatlantic coordination can deliver tangible results, reinforcing shared goals such as democratic governance, open markets, and secure infrastructure. This collaboration will also demonstrate the West's ability to deliver alternatives to authoritarian development models, solidifying influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

China's growing involvement in Anaklia through state-backed companies threatens to bring the port under Beijing's geopolitical influence, potentially turning it into another node in its expanding global port network. A proactive U.S.-EU approach can prevent it from falling into China's orbit by offering joint investments, political support, and private-sector partnerships that align the project with Western standards. By doing so, the West will not only halt China's encroachment in Georgia but also block Beijing's attempts to dominate the Middle Corridor. This strategic alignment will safeguard critical infrastructure from authoritarian influence while anchoring Georgia more firmly in the transatlantic community.

Anchoring the West: Why the U.S. Must Lead on Anaklia

As Georgia moves forward with plans to develop the Anaklia deep-sea port, the United States should increase diplomatic pressure on Tbilisi to reconsider partnering with Chinese companies. To catalyze this shift, the U.S. Department of State should appoint a dedicated envoy or create a task force focused on Black Sea infrastructure and energy security with Anaklia as a central priority. U.S. officials must engage Georgian leadership, civ-

il society, and business stakeholders to highlight the long-term strategic risks of Chinese involvement while offering credible Western alternatives backed by sustained support.

A key step is organizing investment summits and public-private partnership forums that showcase Anaklia's potential as a secure, Western-aligned trade hub, attracting U.S. and European capital. Washington should also lead the formation of a Western-led investment consortium, comprising American and European port developers, logistics firms, and infrastructure investors, backed by financial institutions such as the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), the World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). This consortium would offer Georgia transparent, competitive financing and serve as a compelling alternative to Chinese capital, ensuring the port's strategic alignment with the West.

To reinforce this message, the U.S. should condition future economic, financial, and infrastructure assistance on the exclusion of Chinese state-owned enterprises from the Anaklia project. This would echo recent U.S. legislative measures, such as the [CHIPS and Science Act](#) and the Strategic Ports Reporting Act, which aim to block authoritarian influence over critical infrastructure. By leveraging both diplomatic and financial tools, the U.S. can support Georgia in establishing safeguards to prevent foreign authoritarian control over strategic assets.

The United States should also reconfigure its military and security cooperation with Georgia around the port project. This could include naval

training exercises, maritime domain awareness programs, and cybersecurity assistance tailored to critical port infrastructure. These initiatives would bolster Georgia's sovereignty and resilience while signaling to Beijing and Moscow that Anaklia is part of a U.S.-backed security architecture. Linking Anaklia's development to regional security frameworks ensures the port becomes a linchpin in a broader Western defense and trade strategy.

Although Georgia is not yet a member of NATO or the EU, the U.S. can work closely with Brussels to position Anaklia's development as a stepping-stone toward Euro-Atlantic integration. NATO and EU officials—coordinating with Washington—should stress that transparency, rule-of-law reforms, and independence from authoritarian influence are essential prerequisites for deeper institutional ties. Framing Anaklia within a wider Euro-Atlantic context would encourage Western companies to invest while strengthening public support in Georgia for Western, rather than Chinese, participation.

In an era when maritime chokepoints and trade infrastructure shape global power, Anaklia is far more than a Georgian infrastructure project—it is a strategic asset. Investing in its development allows the United States to reinforce regional partnerships, expand its economic footprint in Eurasia, and push back against the growing influence of its strategic rivals across the Black Sea and beyond.

This is not just about Georgia. In the context of escalating competition with China, supporting the Anaklia deep-sea port will be a forward-looking move to secure U.S. strategic influence in one of the world's most geopolitically contested regions ■

Peace, Power, and Paradoxes: Trump's Iran Gamble and Its Regional Reverberations

The greatness of a President is measured by the wars he has avoided - Donald Trump once [declared](#). As his attempts to impose peace in Ukraine stall and dreams of “peace in 24 hours” or “in a few weeks” evaporate, the Iranian nuclear issue may well offer the American president another opportunity to claim greatness and, incidentally, peace in the eyes of the American voters. The latter are far more important to him than the opinion of any of the U.S. allies, even the oldest and most loyal.

The Trump administration is now attempting to revive the idea of a nuclear deal with Iran, something the West painstakingly and laboriously achieved in 2015 in Vienna, an agreement known as the JCPOA ([Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#)), which Trump [walked away](#) from in 2018, calling it a catastrophe. Trump was not the only one to look askance at the JCPOA. Israel [made no se-](#)

[cret](#) of its dissatisfaction at the time (just as it is doing now about this new wave of negotiations), Gulf states were not happy, and even French diplomacy signed it reluctantly under pressure from the Obama administration. The key point was the lack of confidence in the Iranian leadership and the fear that the agreements and the consequent easing of sanctions would allow the Tehran “mollarchy” to prolong its life.

For this reason and because of the memory of General Qasem Soleimani's [elimination](#) by an American missile in January 2020 (he was known to be the true architect of Iran's regional influence and the right-hand man of the Supreme leader), Donald Trump's return to power for many was synonymous with an imminent increase in pressure on Teheran, even with the dramatic rise of the risk of war against Iran. The first steps of the Trump 2.0 administration did indeed point in this direction.



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In January, the White House [reinstated](#) the “maximum pressure” policy, aiming to reduce Iran’s oil exports to zero. The administration imposed new sanctions targeting entities involved in Iran’s oil trade, particularly those facilitating sales to China. The U.S. expanded its sanctions a few weeks later, [targeting](#) Iran’s drone and ballistic missile programs and the entities in Iran and abroad involved in procuring components for these programs. Additionally, the U.S. sanctioned networks for facilitating the sale of Iranian liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) in violation of U.S. sanctions.

But on 7 March, President Trump made yet another breaking announcement that he had sent a letter to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, [proposing](#) new nuclear negotiations. The letter reportedly demanded the full dismantling of Iran’s nuclear program, the cessation of uranium enrichment, and an end to support for proxy groups like Hezbollah and the Houthis. Initially, Khamenei [rejected](#) the overture, accusing the U.S. of seeking dominance rather than genuine negotiation. However, by the end of March, Iran [expressed](#) readiness to engage in talks, leading to the initiation of negotiations in April. The peace doves Trump is sending to Tehran, however, are folded from dollar-bill origami—a not-so-subtle promise of sanctions relief and investment in exchange for submission. To this end, three rounds of negotiations have already [taken place](#) in Masqat, Oman, between Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and Donald Trump’s special envoy for the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, and two rounds were organized in Rome.

The Logic Behind Iran’s Interest in Negotiations

Iran in 2025 is much more vulnerable than it was ten years ago when the nuclear deal was signed in Vienna.

Iran in 2025 is much more vulnerable than it was ten years ago when the nuclear deal was signed in Vienna. The regime is at bay, economically exhausted, internally contested, and now deprived of its regional proxies. Economic ties only with China and Russia did not help Iran to develop and grow, and the country needs to ease sanctions to attract Western investments.

Since the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) in 2018, Tehran has significantly expanded its uranium enrichment activities. As of May 2025, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) [reports](#) that Iran has accumulated approximately 408.6 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60% purity—a level just below weapons-grade. While Iran’s total stockpile of enriched uranium across all levels has reached around 9,247 kilograms, only a small portion of that is enriched to the highly sensitive 60% level. This accumulation remains a serious concern, as no other non-nuclear-weapon state is known to enrich uranium to this degree.

Since 2018, Iran has also accelerated the development of its ballistic missile program—a development that must be assessed in tandem with its advancing nuclear capabilities. In parallel, Tehran has reinforced its so-called “axis of resistance,” a network of militant and armed proxies including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, the Houthis in Yemen, Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, and numerous Shia militias in Iraq. Through their military activities, these proxies have formed a strategic security buffer for the Iranian regime, allowing Tehran to project power across a broad arc stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean (Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut) and the Red Sea via Sana’a.

And last but not least, the end of the JCPOA pushed Iran to reinforce strategic relations with Russia, which appeared in the coordinated action and alliance of the two countries in Syria and the massive

[delivery](#) of Iranian military equipment, including Shahed drones, to Russia, after its all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Paradoxically, despite Iran's assertive and seemingly successful regional posture, the regime's domestic stability has significantly eroded during this period. The country has been shaken by recurring waves of unrest, driven by mass protests, economic hardship, and mounting anti-regime sentiment. The Islamic Republic now faces a profound legitimacy challenge, rooted in widespread public discontent. This unrest stems not only from severe inflation and economic deterioration, exacerbated by international sanctions, but also from systemic repression, entrenched corruption among the ruling elites, and a pervasive sense of injustice across Iranian society.

Currently, Iran [can barely export](#) 600,000 barrels of oil daily, compared to more than two million barrels exported before 2018. The recent U.S. sanctions targeting Chinese companies importing Iranian oil, if the Chinese comply, will drastically reduce even these amounts. Inflation is devouring people's revenues, reaching an [annual](#) rate of around 40%. The anger of the population was all the greater as the regime, despite the hardships of its citizens, continued to spend billions on maintaining proxies throughout the Middle East.

Among the most significant anti-regime uprisings in recent years were the nationwide protests of November 2019, sparked by a sudden increase in gasoline prices. Spreading across more than a hundred cities, these demonstrations—later dubbed “Bloody Aban” (Aban being the Iranian calendar month)—were met with brutal repression, [resulting](#) in the deaths of hundreds of civilians at the hands of security forces. Even more prominent were the protests that erupted in September 2022 following the [killing](#) of Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman, by Iran's so-called “morality police.” Known by the rallying cry “Women, Life, Freedom,”

these protests became the largest and most sustained popular movement since the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979, united by a singular, unequivocal demand: the end of the regime.

Some observers now argue that the Islamic Republic has shifted from a theocratic dictatorship to a military-security state.

As a consequence, the regime is grappling with a profound erosion of popular legitimacy, marked by what appears to be a deep—and possibly irreparable—rift between society and the state. This has led to an increasingly militarized approach to internal security, with growing reliance on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basij militia. Some observers now argue that the Islamic Republic has shifted from a theocratic dictatorship to a military-security state. Its ongoing struggle to suppress dissent, despite sustained repression, signals a long-term breakdown in its authority and capacity to govern through consent.

Iran has also faced significant strategic setbacks. The so-called “Axis of Resistance” it painstakingly built, once appeared robust and assertive across multiple fronts. However, the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and Israel's unprecedented military response drastically altered the regional balance of power. Israel has severely and enduringly weakened the military capabilities of both Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, leaving them in a state of near-collapse. In a domino effect, the Assad regime in Damascus [succumbed](#) to the offensive by Sunni militias of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), leading to the cutting of Hezbollah's logistical support. Iran had long armed, funded, and sustained these proxies to create a protective buffer around its borders, but that buffer is now fractured. This erosion of regional leverage is prompting Tehran to adopt greater flexibility as it seeks to safeguard its own survival.

Faced with mounting internal and external pressures, Iran's leadership—led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—opted to [replace](#) hardliner President Ebrahim Raisi, who conveniently perished in a helicopter crash, with the more moderate Masoud Pezeshkian in July 2024. The move appeared aimed at restoring a degree of public trust and signaling a less confrontational approach in foreign and regional policy. However, given the limited influence that previous so-called moderate presidents—Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) and Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021)—had on the core policies of the Islamic Republic, neither the Iranian public nor Western governments harbor serious expectations about Pezeshkian's ability to bring meaningful change. His appointment and subsequent election, marked by very low voter turnout, are widely seen as a tactical maneuver by the regime to project a façade of flexibility and stave off further instability.

The Revived Interest of the Regional Powers

Beyond the United States' determination to secure a deal and Iran's limited capacity to resist one, a notable shift has occurred among many of the Islamic Republic's traditional rivals—most now favor a diplomatic approach toward Tehran, with the exception of Israel. The Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), once firmly aligned with U.S. efforts to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions, have reassessed their stance. In 2018, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi [backed](#) President Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA, citing Tehran's ballistic missile development and destabilizing actions across the region. Yet by spring 2023, this posture had significantly softened. In a landmark [agreement](#) brokered by China, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to restore diplomatic ties, marking a major step toward regional de-escalation. By 2025, Saudi Arabia has gone a step

further, offering to mediate between Washington and Tehran to help revive a nuclear accord. During a historic visit to Tehran, Saudi Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman [encouraged](#) Iran to consider President Trump's proposal as a means to prevent a potential confrontation with Israel.

The Saudis and other Gulf states are strongly opposed to another war in the region. They recognize that any military strike on Iran—whether by Israel, the United States, or both—could escalate into a prolonged and destabilizing conflict, drawing in multiple countries and non-state actors. With ambitious development agendas underway, including Saudi Arabia's plans to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup, regional stability is seen as essential. Another key factor is their privileged relationship with Washington: following Donald Trump's high-profile Middle East tour and the signing of massive arms and investment deals worth hundreds of billions of dollars, Saudi and Emirati leaders have become the most favored regional actors in the White House—receiving far more attention and deference than traditional European allies or even Israel.

Still, even if a new nuclear agreement is reached, a full normalization of relations with Iran remains unlikely. While Iran's nuclear ambitions are the most urgent concern, they are far from the only one. Tehran's aggressive regional policies, hostility toward Israel, and ongoing missile development present persistent challenges. Most fundamentally, the Islamic Republic's ideology is built on enmity toward the United States and Israel. The regime relies on its confrontation with the “Great Satan” and the “Zionist entity” as a cornerstone of its legitimacy. A reopened U.S. embassy in Tehran, with massive crowds of Iranians lining up for visas, would represent not just a political embarrassment but a devastating blow to the regime's core narrative.

An Unexpected Gift for Moscow?

Expert discussions on Iran rarely highlight the fact that this country borders the South Caucasus. Even if it does not play a leading role there, developments in and around Iran can have significant consequences for the region. Today, however, the most influential factor shaping the geopolitics of the entire post-Soviet space—and indeed of the European continent as a whole—is the war in Ukraine, in which Iran also plays a notable role. This role consists of supporting Vladimir Putin's war machine through the supply of weapons manufactured in Iran and the joint production of military equipment. Iran and Russia also rely on covert mechanisms, such as gold transfers and the use of intermediary countries, to bypass international sanctions.

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Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Tehran and Moscow have considerably deepened their military cooperation, engaging in joint arms production and technology transfers. For instance, Russia has [set up](#) a drone factory in the Elabuga Special Economic Zone in Tatarstan, where it produces Iranian-designed Shahed drones, rebranded as Geran-2. Iran has [reportedly](#) also delivered ballistic missiles, such as the Fath-360, which have been used against Ukraine. In May 2025, the Iranian parliament [ratified](#) a 20-year strategic partnership agreement with Russia, formalizing their defense ties.

What impact could a potential U.S.-Iran deal have on the war in Ukraine? Most likely, the American negotiators avoided addressing the issue of Iran's military cooperation with Russia. The talks

with Tehran's envoys in Muscat and Rome appear to have focused solely on nuclear matters. Unlike the JCPOA negotiations, the Europeans (France, the United Kingdom, and Germany) are no longer involved—neither the Americans nor the Iranians want them at the table. Yet Russia and Iran's deepening military ties are a serious concern for Europe, which backs Ukraine's independence and views Moscow as the principal threat to the continent's security.

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Thus, if Washington and Tehran reach an agreement on uranium enrichment levels, stockpile limits, the import of nuclear materials from third countries, and conditions for permanent inspections, U.S. sanctions—at least a significant portion of them—will be lifted. This would inject new life into the Iranian economy and strengthen a regime that will likely continue its military cooperation with Russia with even greater energy. In other words, we might see more Shaheds and Iranian missiles against Ukraine.

The nature of Europe's relationship with Iran has changed drastically in recent years. During the JCPOA era, European governments largely supported normalization with Tehran, the lifting of sanctions, and even rushed to invest in the Iranian market. Today, however, Europe's stance on the Islamic Republic is far tougher than Washington's. Beyond the nuclear file, what makes normalization nearly impossible are the brutal crackdowns following the “Women, Life, Freedom” uprising and Iran's appalling human rights record and democratic regression.

The Trump administration views the situation very

differently. It shows little concern for Iran's domestic repression or its military alliance with Russia. On the contrary, Trump hopes to leverage the close ties between Moscow and Tehran to reach a deal with Russia serving as the intermediary. Both Trump and his envoy Richard Goldberg openly [acknowledge](#) that Iran is a topic of discussion in their contacts with the Kremlin and they count on Putin's assistance. There is little reason to believe the Russian leader would refuse—on the contrary, he is likely to help, and at Ukraine's expense.

It is worth recalling that this idea of using Russia to broker a deal with Iran is not new. President Obama also made this strategic misstep during his term, although at that time, Russia, while already the aggressor in Georgia and the occupier of Crimea, had not yet launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

If, in a deal with Moscow, the West fails to demand an end to Russian-Iranian military cooperation while Russia, for example, insists on halting NATO enlargement, then that cooperation will only intensify. Sanctions relief would embolden both regimes.

What holds true for Trump's approach to Iran also applies to his posture toward Russia: if, in a deal with Moscow, the West fails to demand an end to Russian-Iranian military cooperation while Russia, for example, insists on halting NATO enlargement, then that cooperation will only intensify. Sanctions relief would embolden both regimes. The fundamental error lies in Washington's attempt to treat negotiations with these two adversarial regimes separately when, in reality, they are deeply aligned and mutually reinforcing.

New Opportunities for the Caucasus-Black Sea Region

Beyond its implications for the Russia-Ukraine war, a potential U.S.-Iran agreement could also have a direct impact on the three South Caucasus countries.

Azerbaijan is likely to be the most affected. Notably, it was the only country in the region [visited](#) by Steve Witkoff, the chief U.S. negotiator with Iran, in March, shortly after Trump's letter to Ayatollah Khamenei became public. Azerbaijan maintains an ambivalent relationship with Tehran, historically marked by tensions over national identity, conflicting historical narratives, Iran's stance during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994), and the status of the sizable Azerbaijani population in Iran. While these tensions have eased somewhat in recent years, they persist beneath the surface.

Despite these complex ties, Baku has no interest in a military conflict involving Iran. A war, especially one initiated by Israel or the United States, could destabilize Azerbaijan, potentially triggering a wave of (mostly ethnic Azerbaijani) refugees from Iran. Moreover, if Tehran sought to retaliate against Azerbaijan for its close partnership with Israel, the country's vital oil infrastructure, within easy reach of Iranian missiles, would be an obvious target.

Yet, full normalization of Iran's global status could also pose challenges for Baku. The reentry of Iranian oil and gas into world markets could depress energy prices, threatening Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon-dependent economy. In addition, a reintegrated Iran might seek a greater role in East-West trade corridors, potentially undermining Azerbaijan's position as a key transit hub in the South Caucasus.

Strategically, the resurgence of Iran, even as a non-nuclear regional power, runs counter to the interests of Azerbaijan's main allies. Türkiye sees Iran as a regional competitor while Israel regards it as an outright adversary. For Baku, then, peace with Iran is acceptable—but not at the cost of empowering Tehran politically, economically, or militarily.

Armenia, by contrast, has enjoyed consistently positive relations with Iran since gaining independence. Tehran supported Yerevan during the 1990s conflict with Azerbaijan, helping deliver Russian arms and natural gas to offset Armenia's severe energy shortages. To this day, Armenia remains Iran's largest trading partner in the South Caucasus.

More recently, however, Armenia has begun pivoting toward the West, particularly Europe, spurred by a sense of Russian abandonment after the loss of Karabakh. A U.S.-Iran agreement could open new economic opportunities for Armenia, including access to cheaper energy. A normalized Iran, better integrated into global markets, could serve as a partial substitute for an increasingly unreliable Russia. Armenia might also benefit from its geographic position as a potential land bridge between Iran and Georgia, facilitating trade to the Black Sea and beyond. Politically, however, alignment with the Tehran-Moscow axis no longer seems to be Yerevan's priority.

Georgia, the only South Caucasus state without a direct border with Iran, would experience fewer immediate economic gains from sanctions relief. Nevertheless, Iranian goods could reach Georgia via Armenia or Azerbaijan, thereby boosting activity in its Black Sea ports, such as Batumi and Poti. Georgia could leverage its location to position itself as a transit hub for Iran-Europe trade, particularly through cooperation with the EU or Chinese infrastructure initiatives, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor.

Politically, the ruling Georgian Dream party—now increasingly alienated from the EU and the United States—has been seeking closer ties with Iran.

Politically, the ruling Georgian Dream party—now increasingly alienated from the EU and the United States—has been seeking closer ties with Iran. The attendance of Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze at President Raisi's funeral, standing alongside Hezbollah figures, drew intense criticism from Washington and is now frequently cited as evidence of Georgia's drift from the West.

Should Washington and Tehran reach an agreement, the Georgian government may further solidify its rapprochement with Iran, framing it as consistent with U.S. policy. However, Tbilisi will need to tread carefully to avoid antagonizing Baku, whose political and economic influence in Georgia is steadily growing. If Georgia's overtures to Iran extend too far, it could jeopardize its increasingly important relationship with Azerbaijan.

The prospect of a renewed U.S.-Iran nuclear agreement vividly underscores the contradictions and trade-offs at the heart of Donald Trump's foreign policy. Framed domestically as a victory for peace over conflict, such a deal would bolster Trump's electoral narrative by highlighting his signature brand of bold, transactional diplomacy. However, the implications of such an agreement would stretch far beyond the borders of Iran and the United States.

Reintegrating Iran into global political and economic systems without securing serious commitments risks empowering the regime rather than moderating it. In the absence of concrete guarantees regarding its support for militant proxies, its ballistic missile program, and—most critically—its expanding military partnership with Russia, the agreement could ultimately reinforce two re-

gimes, in Tehran and Moscow, that actively undermine the existing international order.

For Europe, particularly states bordering Russia and relying on transatlantic solidarity to counter Putin's war in Ukraine, the prospect of ignoring or downplaying the Iran-Russia nexus is deeply concerning.

For Europe, particularly states bordering Russia and relying on transatlantic solidarity to counter Putin's war in Ukraine, the prospect of ignoring or downplaying the Iran-Russia nexus is deeply concerning. Should Washington lift sanctions on Tehran without addressing this military alliance—and worse, rely on Moscow as a backchannel to finalize the deal—it will be seen not as a diplomatic breakthrough but as a grave strategic misjudgment across the European continent ■

Readied to Serve: From Civil Service to Political Servants under Georgian Dream

On 20 February 2025, the rump Georgian Parliament, where only MPs from the Georgian Dream party sit, [abolished](#) the Civil Service Bureau, a body created in 2004 which aimed, [according](#) to its website, at “implementing a unified state policy in the field of civil service to align with European Union values and principles of public administration.” That symbolic decision marked a final breakoff of Georgia’s ruling party from those very [principles](#) - one of the “fundamentals” of the EU accession process.

On the New Year’s Eve of 2025, over 50 civil servants [received](#) their dismissal letters. One of the first acts of Mikheil Kavelashvili, [inaugurated](#) president by a single-party electoral college on 29 December 2024, was to [sign](#) into law the [changes](#) that established political dominance over the civil service and abolished the political independence of

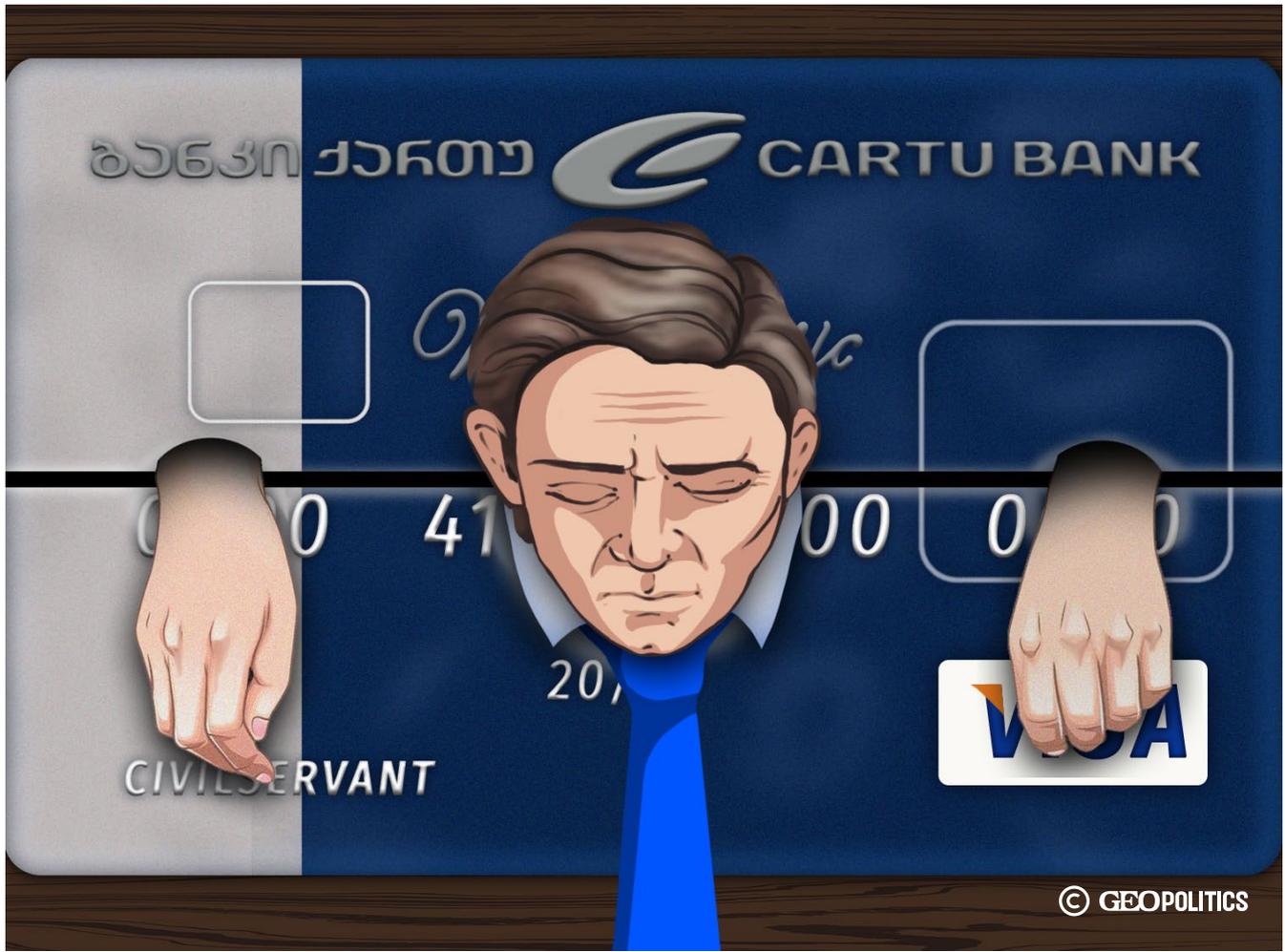
senior civil servant positions and made it easier to fire or hire them on a political whim, immediately upon his inauguration.

Curiously, it was the Georgian Dream that initiated the new Law on Civil Service in 2015, putting the country’s administration on a path of approximation with EU standards. The law and the strategy that went with it were generously supported – financially and in kind, through training, partnerships, and counselling – by the European Union as well as by others such as the government of the United Kingdom (through UNDP), Germany (through GIZ) and the United States (through USAID). These programs and the dedication of the individual civil servants brought important results, even if often invisible to ordinary citizens. The government’s policymaking process was streamlined and put on a solid methodological basis across the ministries. Human resources policies



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were also synchronized to ensure a professional, merit-based process. Steps were also made to unify the training for the new civil servants and integrate topics such as non-discrimination. Largely thanks to these civil servants, Georgia administratively responded to the exceptional opportunity of the EU candidacy in record time.

So what went wrong and what lessons must international actors retain from this abrupt collapse?

Reversal of the Tide?

States came to the idea of a professional civil service as the complexity of state management and international relations grew over time. By the 17th century, European courts realized officials who attained their positions through protection or bribes were no longer good enough. Few “fonctionnaires” were appointed. Experience was particularly valued in managing the crown’s finances and the mil-

itary. However, the notion of a “civil servant” came about first in the East India Company, which started competitive recruitment in 1806.

[The 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan Report](#) generalized the practices of merit-based recruitment and career path, setting a division between “technical” and “administrative” posts. This foundational model was enriched in the 20th century. In the democracies of the 1960s and the 1970s, the notion prevailed that professional state servants utterly serve the legal order and public interest, even though they are subordinate to elected political leadership. By the 1980s, the New Public Management approach dictated that administration serves citizens and provides state services.

Both of these 20th-century developments fed into the [European Principles of Public Administration](#) that set the freedom from political patronage as its cornerstone and established the “policy process”

as the key avenue through which elected leaders channel their publicly approved programs via the machinery of state. In this model, civil servants are topical experts and service providers. Their most senior representatives, almost on par with political leaders, ensure that the political decisions conform to the realm of Constitutional legality.

The Georgian Dream speaks of the Deep State as some kind of global conspiracy, but that term in the mouth of populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies refers, more often than not, to the civil service, independent institutions, and the so-called “established media.”

It is this very concept of professional, politically neutral administration that is coming under fire, not only in Georgia but also in some established democracies. The Georgian Dream speaks of the Deep State as some kind of global conspiracy, but that term in the mouth of populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies refers, more often than not, to the civil service, independent institutions, and the so-called “established media.” In the U.S., the [calls](#) to “defeat the administrative state” are close to the MAGA mainstream. In Europe, too, the populist leaderships rail against the so-called “unelected officials” of the European Commission based on the same premise – that their legitimacy acquired through professionally serving the legal order is inferior and thus should remain subordinate to that granted by (often assumed) popular mandate.

In this sense, the leadership in Tbilisi is riding the reversal of the international tide to push for its own partisan benefit. But from another point of view, strengthening the professional civil service goes inherently against the incentives of political leadership.

Hesitant Reforms

Empowering a politically independent, professional, career-based, and citizen-oriented civil service means democratic elected leaders sharing crucial bits of power and – importantly for a democratic process – credit for success. In a paternalistic state like Georgia, top executives are expected to – and credited with – small advances in people’s lives. A village water supply repaired, a pothole fixed, social assistance delivered to those in need – all of these small but crucial benefits can be claimed for political credit or be implemented by the civil service (or, for that matter, local government). The first way gives political brownie points to the leaders and benefits the few. The second way goes invisible but has the potential to help many. It is one thing in countries where the civil service seemingly “always” existed and quite another thing in places where the ruling party and the executive have always dominated the civil service. In these places, politicians need additional incentives to opt for sharing power and establishing a civil service.

This is precisely what happened in the early 2000s. Georgians had had enough of the government’s ineptness, that brought the country to the verge of state failure. The new administration in 2003 set out to change that and made reformed public services (civil registry, property registry, etc.) into trademark successes. Young people and seasoned professionals were brought into the civil service and its prestige grew. But impressive as it was, the progress was uneven – the United National Movement administration never conceded to a fully professional, unified civil service. The ministries competed for qualified staff and those with higher budgets and prestige benefited disproportionately. This meant that while the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of the Interior became star reformers, important agencies such as the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare were held back. Crucially, the

United National Movement never introduced the position of senior civil servants (also known as state secretaries in some European countries) who lead civil servants in any given ministry or agency and are (almost) co-equal interlocutors to a minister. The minister governs while the state secretary manages – in conversations with the author, representatives of the former administration in 2010 argued that this concept was too inflexible, alien to the organizational culture, and, ultimately, politically inexpedient.

When the Georgian Dream came to power in 2012, they were deeply suspicious of civil servants hired under the preceding regime. At the same time, however, the ruling party tried to mark its credentials as a pro-European force and willingly followed the European Union's advice to bolster the civil service. By 2015, the Georgian Dream was often mocked for the ineptness of its administration and the new Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, bet on civil service reform to make his mark. In 2015, the new Law on Civil Service was born. Yet, its concept and implementation suffered from three key weaknesses.

Politicized Process

The politicization of the reform process frayed its foundations. The reform was supposed to build a firewall between the political leadership and the civil service. In practice, however, high-ranking officials and political decision-makers—often lacking genuine reform experience—consistently intervened in operational details such as performance evaluations, recruitment processes, and training programs. This not only diluted the reform's transformative potential but also reinforced informal networks that were based on loyalty and patronage rather than merit. The political leaders never intended to “let go” of their primacy.

Regulatory Inadequacies

Another critical inherent weakness was the fragmented legal and regulatory framework. The initial legislative design was never implemented. The reform's success hinged on the swift adoption of a unified set of laws and bylaws. However, persistent delays in legislating key components, such as the laws on remuneration and the status of Legal Entities of Public Law (LEPLs), created a protracted state of uncertainty. These delays allowed entrenched interests to maneuver around the intended reforms, thereby preserving practices that maintained and expanded the loopholes for partisan/political influence. LEPLs and local government (initially supposed to be kept out of the Law's purview) became the key loopholes for consolidating political influence as reservoirs for building patronage networks.

Professionalization of the civil service never touched the senior civil service. In fact, the senior civil servant/state secretary positions were never created. LEPLs were never properly brought under the umbrella of civil service law with multiple reports that many of them were used as a reservoir for partisan mobilization, especially at a local level.

Insufficient Institutional Capacity and Leadership

The lack of a cohesive, professionally driven vision for civil service reform meant that even when technical guidance was available from international partners, it was not translated into practice or ignored when it clashed with partisan agendas.

Finally, the reform effort was undermined by chronic deficiencies in institutional capacity. The Civil Service Bureau was never integrated into the executive management structure and remained a quasi-agency without sufficient “pull power” beyond spearheading technical adjustments in implementing policy processes. Without strong, dedicated leadership to champion the reform agenda, the political imperative further diluted the intended impact. The lack of a cohesive, professionally driven vision for civil service reform meant that even when technical guidance was available from international partners, it was not translated into practice or ignored when it clashed with partisan agendas.

Downhill

Yet, even with some hesitant changes, the Georgian civil service was exhibiting performance appreciated by most citizens, especially in the areas where they came into direct contact with the administration. The inertia of reforms has kept qualified and motivated civil servants inside most center-of-government agencies. Yet, it has been a worry of many experts, including the author, that the adapted legislation and rules of procedure were primarily implemented formally. They co-existed with the patrimonial organizational culture dominated by the politically appointed minister who unified political and administrative roles. It has long been evident that such centralization created the expectations and culture of personal loyalty, while the absence of the position of senior civil servant meant individual officers were defenseless against the political diktat. While the Civil Service Bureau lacked the power to arbitrate personal disputes, going to the courts to defend one’s interests, as, for example, a whistleblower, was considered an extremely costly step.

Already in 2020, the concerns about informal security surveillance on civil service were brought into sharp contrast during the so-called “cartog-

raphers’ case” when, during the election campaign, two civil servants were charged with alleged treason. The Public Defender of Georgia [identified](#) political motives behind the allegations and while the two civil servants were [released](#) on bail in January 2021, the case was never closed.

By the time local elections were held in 2021, political leaders had exploited the civil service to further entrench party interests. The OSCE/ODIHR [noted](#) that the ruling party had “blurred the line between the party and the state, at odds with OSCE commitments and good practice.” Incidents such as the mobilization of public servants for partisan rallies, the overt politicization of local governance and the quasi-state agencies, and the public pronouncements by top officials underscored a deliberate blurring of the lines between state institutions and party politics. These measures, taken ostensibly to secure electoral victories by the ruling party, directly undermined the impartiality and professionalism required for effective public administration reform. Moreover, they created an atmosphere where these qualities were less and less valued by the political leadership.

Cases of using “reorganization” as a pretext for firing civil servants whose partisan loyalty was questioned accelerated from 2021 onwards.

A policy brief [published](#) by the Caucasus University in late 2021 found that 6,434 civil servants were terminated from the civil service in this period, which is a considerable number since the Civil Service Bureau [reported](#) a total of 14,826 civil servants in Georgia in 2021 (excluding the Ministry of the Interior). Repeated cases of arbitrary dismissal have been reported since and even though former civil servants often won their cases in court, they were rarely restored to their positions. Cases of using “reorganization” as a pretext for firing civil servants whose partisan loyalty was questioned accelerated from 2021 onwards.

From the end of 2022, the ruling party, first indirectly, through affiliated radical political movements, and then openly, moved to restrict the operation of independent civil society groups and accused Western partners of fomenting dissent. The debate over the passage of the restrictive “law on foreign agents” dominated the public debate in 2023 and 2024, leading to widespread protests, which were often violently suppressed.

The manipulation of public institutions for electoral gain, combined with selective enforcement of regulations, created a double standard in governance. This double standard eroded the legitimacy of reform efforts as civil servants became increasingly demotivated by an environment that rewards loyalty over competence.

Between 2021 and 2025, the political landscape in Georgia experienced a series of dramatic shifts that fundamentally undermined the premises of the public administration reform. The continuous cycle of disruptions led to the erosion of core principles of European public administration—transparency, accountability, efficiency, and a citizen-oriented approach. The manipulation of public institutions for electoral gain, combined with selective enforcement of regulations, created a double standard in governance. This double standard eroded the legitimacy of reform efforts as civil servants became increasingly demotivated by an environment that rewards loyalty over competence.

Serving Repression?

Many reforms since 2003, in continuity between the two, politically viciously opposed administrations, did contribute to building and sustaining the civil service’s resilience as long as possible. Most civil servants trained and coached through these

efforts – often with foreign support – have fulfilled their duties faithfully to their oath of serving the Constitution. Hundreds – including the officers of the Civil Service Bureau – have spoken out at a critical juncture when the government suspended the accession process in the EU, saying it was going against Constitutional provisions.

Yet, many civil servants continue to fulfill their functions, even as in 2024 and early 2025 when Georgia experienced both legislative changes and societal events that distanced it considerably from the policy objectives still enshrined in official strategic documents and the Constitution.

Legislative changes introduced since 2024 and challenged by constitutional lawyers have affected essential freedoms. They restricted LGBTQI+ rights, abolished mandatory gender quotas in parliamentary elections, proposed a legislative package that seeks to eliminate the terms “gender” and “gender identity” from all Georgian legislation, facilitated offshore capital transfers, and instated the controversial “foreign influence” laws, severely limiting the operations of civil society organizations and curbing media freedom. Changes to the administrative offenses code and the criminal code put many civic activists on the docket – or in prisons.

So, was public administration reform a complete failure? The answer is nuanced.

Despite apparent failures, they created a residual organizational and professional knowledge that may again become relevant if and when Georgia’s democratic trajectory is restored and is likely to contribute to citizens receiving an acceptable quality of service in areas that are least affected by the unfolding crisis. The development of local administrative expertise in areas such as policy planning, the assessment of government programs and costing, budget planning and public services strengthens the country’s long-term capacity for policy development and implementation should the environment change.

Without institutional safeguards to protect professional integrity and ensure continuity, the foreign expertise directed toward civil service and public administration reforms is easily wasted.

These failures must also serve as a lesson that, without institutional safeguards to protect professional integrity and ensure continuity, the foreign expertise directed toward civil service and public

administration reforms is easily wasted. Any effort to support countries in their transition toward European standards must involve continuous assessment of the implementation context, including political messaging, as civil service reform is not merely a technical or administrative process. Above all, it requires leadership committed to changing the attitudes of the political elite and the ring-fencing of civil servants who are working to drive this transformation ■

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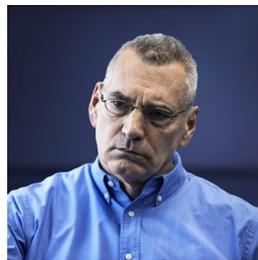
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GEO POLITICS

Issue N°19
June, 2025