

GEO POLITICS

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Our Mission

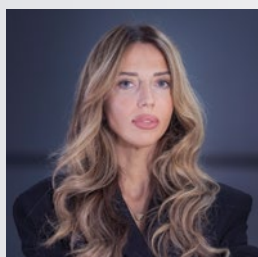
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual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

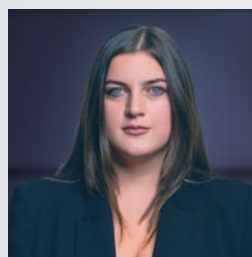
In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOpolitics* echoes the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia 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.



Ana Khurtsidze

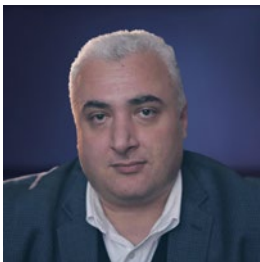
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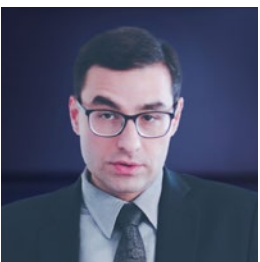
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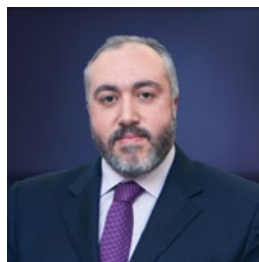
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“No Justice, No Peace” — The Inglourious “Basterds” of Rustaveli

They have been called dreamers, radicals, rootless, troublemakers, even “foreign agents.” But for 284 days, they have been Georgia’s own *Inglourious* — or, perhaps, *Glorious* — “Basterds”, resisting the country’s authoritarian turn at every corner. They gather on Rustaveli Avenue in rain and heat, in small rallies and mass marches alike. They show up at the courts to face judges who long ago traded justice for loyalty and money, at the Public Broadcaster that has turned its cameras away from dissent, at ministries that have shut their doors to Europe, and at the ruling party offices to show that they are not afraid. They go to jail tall and free, they refuse to admit guilt, because they are not guilty, they refuse to bow, since surrendering now means surrendering the country’s European future. They are the students who will not be silenced, the journalists who refuse to stop broadcasting and reporting, the NGO leaders whose accounts are frozen and who are demonized daily, the activists who risk fines, jail time, and beatings, the politicians who, fractured and fallible though they are, still walk willingly into jail cells rather than abandon the cause.

This is Georgia’s front line — not glamorous, not always united, but too fearless and resilient. And their fight is not only domestic: it reverberates across the European continent and the wider region where Georgia’s struggle for democracy and sovereignty collides with the realigning policies of Western powers and a ruthless attempt of Russia to sow its own model of authoritarian governance.

This issue of *GEOPOLITICS* is about the resistance, the least our team can do to contribute to the fight against oppression, Georgia’s Russian turn, and ubiquitous injustice.

Vano Chkhikvadze opens with an article on the endurance of Georgia’s youth-led resistance, now stretching past 284 days of protest on Rustaveli Avenue and beyond. He shows how young Georgians, shaped by European values, education, and digital literacy, have proven hardest for the ruling party to tame. Free of state patronage networks and less susceptible to propaganda, they stand at the center of Georgia’s democratic defiance. Chkhikvadze details the regime’s tripod of survival—economic dependence, intimidation, and propaganda—and how it collapses against the immunity of youth. With every new restriction, be it “foreign agent” laws, punitive fines, or state-orchestrated smear campaigns, the young respond with resilience, creativity, and renewed determination. His message is unambiguous: this generation is too young to fear and too strong to break, and Europe must not abandon them. Support cannot come in the form of hollow declarations but through sanctions on elites, financial lifelines for civil society, and the redirection of EU policy from rhetoric to action.

Jaba Devdariani continues the story by shifting the lens from the streets to the newsrooms where Georgia’s embattled media is waging its own war of survival. His article, framed by the case of Mzia Amaghlobeli—the journalist turned prisoner of conscience—reminds us that an au-

thoritarian state's first instinct is to silence truth-tellers. Devdariani takes readers through the structural vulnerabilities of Georgia's media market: a tiny advertising base, captured television stations, and the suffocating dominance of government-aligned broadcasters that flood the airwaves with propaganda. Yet, within this bleak landscape, he identifies the seeds of resilience: the rise of independent online outlets, the growing influence of social media, and innovative models of donor- and subscriber-backed journalism. Devdariani's prescription is clear—Georgia's media will not survive on commercial logic alone. It requires imaginative, structural support, including pooled funding mechanisms, endowments, and EU-led "Team Europe" approaches that treat journalism not as charity but as a strategic investment in democracy. If the youth are the pulse of the resistance, the media remains its indispensable voice.

Sergi Kapanadze turns the focus to Georgia's embattled opposition, arguing that the real question is no longer whether it can win but whether it can survive. With leaders jailed or exiled, finances strangled, and media space suffocated, the opposition faces three looming horizons: the 4 October elections, the protests that will follow, and the threat of outright banning. Kapanadze highlights the paradox of imprisoned leaders—Saakashvili, Gvaramia, Melia, Japaridze, Vashadze—who carry symbolic capital that could unite or further fracture the field. Mapping four fragmented poles—Coalition for Change, UNM, Lelo/For Georgia, and allies of Zourabichvili—he warns that only an umbrella coalition, a credible government-in-waiting, and disciplined, nationwide campaigning can prevent extinction. For Georgia's Western partners, the message is blunt: even a flawed opposition must be backed or Ivanishvili will consolidate one-party rule.

Shota Gvineria takes us outward to Georgia's foreign policy crisis where silence has become the

loudest signal. He dissects Georgia's conspicuous absence from the Washington summit between Aliyev and Pashinyan, an omission that symbolizes the country's deepening marginalization at the very moment its neighbors are breaking free from Moscow's grip. While Armenia and Azerbaijan maneuver toward peace under U.S. auspices, Georgia sinks deeper into Russia's orbit, paralyzed by authoritarian backsliding and elite capture. Gvineria warns against Western illusions that the Georgian Dream can still be nudged back to the Euro-Atlantic path. The legitimacy crisis is not about elections alone but about a ruling party that has betrayed the constitutional will of its people, using repression and propaganda to sell capitulation to Moscow as pragmatism. The real false dilemma, he argues, lies in Western policy circles: the notion that Georgia can be treated as an ally without being democratic. For Gvineria, the binary is stark—Georgia is either democratic and pro-Western or autocratic and beholden to Russia. There is no transactional middle ground.

Natalie Sabanadze picks up this thread by embedding Georgia's crisis in the wider unraveling of the liberal order. She insists that Georgia is not merely a domestic anomaly but a frontline case in the global contest between authoritarian revisionists and the West. Her article reflects on Georgia's incomplete democratization, its lack of a Václav Havel, and the paradox of a society more democratic than its rulers. Sabanadze warns that in a multipolar world more tolerant of authoritarian deviations, Georgia's rulers feel emboldened to abandon the West with few costs. Yet, she also celebrates a new generation of democratic heroes—journalists, poets, and actors—whose sacrifices prove that democracy is not alien to Georgian soil, but is owned and nurtured by its people. For her, saving Georgian democracy is inseparable from containing Russia. If the West allows "Georgia fatigue" to set in, it hands Ivanishvili the greatest prize: the perception that Georgia is already lost. Against this, she calls for a recalibrated

Western strategy—treating support for Georgia's democracy not as altruism, but as hard security.

Temuri Yakobashvili then widens the scope further, arguing that Georgia's foreign policy is in existential crisis because it has lost its historic mission. Drawing on a Georgian classic literary work *Data Tutashkhia*, he frames Georgia's statehood as inseparable from its international function. For three decades, that role was the corridor paradigm: pipelines, railways, and highways linking East and West, hardwiring Georgia into European markets and security. But wars in Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Middle East have redrawn the map and the rise of the Zangezur/Syunik/TRIPP corridor threatens to sideline Georgia from the very game it once anchored. Yakobashvili warns that Georgia risks becoming the "Nokia of Eurasia"—once indispensable, now outcompeted, its brand eroding in irrelevance. His conclusion is a stark choice: either Georgia reclaims its mission through renewed Euro-Atlantic integration and Western partnerships or it resigns itself to irrelevance, watching others redraw the connectivity map while it slips into *cul-de-sac* status.

Thornike Gordadze closes the issue with a sweeping analysis of Azerbaijan's triumphant multi-vector diplomacy, a stark foil to Georgia's paralysis. He demonstrates how Baku, scarred by the Nagorno-Karabakh wars, has leveraged hy-

drocarbons and careful alliances to achieve sovereign status. Gordadze recounts how Aliyev's Azerbaijan can host Israeli president, converse in Azerbaijani with Iran's leader, secure Trump's embrace and China's partnership, all while restoring territorial integrity and keeping Russian troops off its soil. Azerbaijan, he argues, embodies the ruthless transactionalism of our era, aligning with whomever advances its interests while remaining captive to none. The contrast with Georgia is devastating. While the Georgian Dream pleads for recognition but alienates allies, Baku institutionalizes gains, diversifies transit routes, and projects confidence. Gordadze's lesson is as sobering as it is clear: sovereignty is not a slogan but a practice and in the South Caucasus, only those who master it will endure.

All in all, this issue is about an ongoing struggle of Georgia's resistance forces for the country's European future. It is a fight that can only be won with the steadfast support of Western democracies which must recognize this resistance as no less vital than Ukraine's defense against Russia — only here, the battlefield is not in the trenches, but in the courts, the squares, the media, and for the very European soul of the Georgian nation ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

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Disclaimer:

GEOpolitics offers space for a wide range of perspectives, fostering independent thinking and open discussion. The journal articles reflect contributors' views and may not represent the editorial team's position.

Too Young to Fear, Too Strong to Break: Georgia's Fight for Europe

For more than 280 days, large numbers of pro-European Georgians have taken to the streets to protest the decision of Bidzina Ivanishvili and the ruling Georgian Dream party to suspend Georgia's EU accession process. At the forefront of these demonstrations stand young activists who passionately believe in Georgia's European future.

According to the [2023 Youth Study](#) by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), 79 percent of Georgian youth view the European Union's role in the country as rather positive or clearly positive. For them, democracy is closely linked with freedom, free speech, and the principle of popular rule. Liberty and freedom of expression are considered the most important democratic values, while active citizenship, political participation, and respect for differing opinions are also integral to their understanding of democracy. Young Georgians look to the United States and European countries as models, embracing European values and striving to promote them at home.

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Silencing this segment of society has proven to be one of the most formidable challenges for the Georgian Dream. The ruling party has systematically sought to entrench economic and social dependence on the state, thereby ensuring loyalty. The number of civil servants has steadily increased in recent years, subsidies have expanded, and large businesses remain closely tied to ruling elites. A significant share of companies relies on public tenders for survival, further reinforcing dependence on government structures.

Youth activists, however, have largely escaped this web of control. With little or no reliance on state structures, they remain beyond the Georgian Dream's leverage. Many have benefited from



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EU and U.S. educational opportunities and grants, gaining exposure to Western democratic values and strengthening their roles as community leaders and drivers of change. Their strong media literacy and fact-checking skills make them less susceptible to the ruling party's anti-Western propaganda, rendering them an especially difficult target for manipulation.

For the Georgian Dream's leadership, this independence poses a direct threat to its grip on power. The government has, therefore, sought to suppress youth activism through a wide range of measures. These include: enacting draconian legislation prohibiting NGOs and activists from receiving foreign funding, discrediting them by labeling them as "foreign agents" or traitors, imposing heavy fines, blocking bank accounts, and creating a chilling effect; deploying police violence and arrests, establishing state-controlled agencies to distribute funds selectively to loyalist organizations, and pressuring activists to leave the country through moral and physical intimidation. In parallel, the ruling party is quietly advancing higher education reforms aimed at tightening control over the more liberal universities, restricting student activism, and increasing state control mechanisms over universities, including the private ones.

For the Georgian Dream, young people represent the most serious obstacle to its continued rule — perceived as troublemakers, yet also as the driving force behind Georgia's democratic aspirations. In confronting them, the government has increasingly substituted the "force of argument" with the "argument of force."

The Tools for Silencing

The Georgian Dream's strategy for maintaining power rests on three main pillars: economic dependence, intimidation, and propaganda.

Controlling the Business Community and Civil Service

A central pillar of the Georgian Dream's power is its ability to control both the business sector and the civil service through corruption and dependence on state funds. Transparency International Georgia, the country's leading anti-corruption watchdog, [reported](#) 250 alleged cases of high-level corruption as of August 2025.

In the first half of 2025, all political parties in Georgia collectively received GEL 7.59 million (approximately EUR 2.38 million) in donations. Of this, 87 percent—GEL 6.57 million (EUR 2 million)—went to the Georgian Dream alone.

Financial flows reveal the extent of this dominance. In the first half of 2025, all political parties in Georgia [collectively received](#) GEL 7.59 million (approximately EUR 2.38 million) in donations. Of this, 87 percent—GEL 6.57 million (EUR 2 million)—went to the Georgian Dream alone. This amount is more than six times greater than the combined donations received by all opposition parties.

The alignment between political donations and government contracts is striking. Since 2024, eleven companies tied to Georgian Dream donors have won state tenders worth GEL 143.6 million (EUR 45 million). Since 2016, these same companies have secured tenders worth GEL 422 million (EUR 133 million). In addition, 23 donor-linked companies have received simplified procurement contracts totaling GEL 1.5 million (EUR 480,000) since 2016, rising to GEL 15 million (EUR 4.8 million) in cumulative value. By contrast, no company connected to opposition party donors has won a tender during the same period and their total procurement contracts amounted to a mere GEL 185,447 (EUR 58,000).

The public sector offers another avenue of control. In 2024, out of [1.4 million](#) employed Georgians, 320,000—or one in four—worked in the state sector, drawing their salaries from the national budget. This widespread dependence makes many civil servants vulnerable to political pressure. Yet, even within this environment, some dared to voice opposition after the Georgian Dream announced the suspension of EU accession talks.

The response was swift and punitive. Authorities launched so-called “reorganization” [processes](#) in government institutions—effectively purges designed to remove dissenters. Dozens of employees [were dismissed](#) from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and even the Parliament. One of the most symbolic moves was the [abolition](#) of the EU-NATO Information Center, established in 2005 with generous support from Brussels and Washington to provide citizens with objective information about Euro-Atlantic integration. Its closure underscored the ruling party’s determination to dismantle institutions that foster transparency and European values.

Intimidation and the Shrinking Space for Civil Society

Another powerful tool in the Georgian Dream’s arsenal is intimidation. Demonstrators have been beaten, their homes raided, and their finances crippled through heavy fines and arbitrary arrests.

Another powerful tool in the Georgian Dream’s arsenal is intimidation. Demonstrators have been beaten, their homes raided, and their finances crippled through heavy fines and arbitrary arrests. These tactics target not only outspoken critics of the ruling party’s pro-Russian course but also serve as a warning to those who might consider joining the protests.

As demonstrations grew, the government amended administrative legislation to introduce harsher penalties for civic activism. The fine for blocking streets was increased tenfold—from GEL 500 (EUR 160) to GEL 5,000 (EUR 1,600)—while the penalty for staging minor disruptions such as drawing standstills rose twentyfold, from GEL 50 (EUR 16) to GEL 1,000 (EUR 315). Between November 2024 and March 2025, cumulative fines for street blockages alone reached [GEL 2 million](#) (EUR 700,000). More than 60 activists were arrested during this period, including [Mzia Amaghlobeli](#), founder of the independent media outlets, *Netgazeti* and *Batumelebi*, alongside opposition leaders and former politicians.

To further intimidate critics, the Georgian Dream [reinstated](#) the charge of “treason against the homeland” in the criminal code. Broadly defined to include espionage, plotting to overthrow the government, and other national security offenses, the provision provides a legal framework for politically motivated prosecutions.

Civil society organizations—long at the forefront of pro-democracy activism—have also come under direct attack.

Civil society organizations—long at the forefront of pro-democracy activism—have also come under direct attack. The Georgian Dream introduced a Georgian adaptation of the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act ([FARA](#)), obliging NGOs to register as “agents of foreign principles.” Defiance of this requirement carries severe penalties, including criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Complementing this, amendments to the law on grants now require foreign donors to obtain prior approval from the Anti-Corruption Agency, an institution firmly under government control. If approval is denied but funding proceeds, NGOs face fines amounting to double the value of the grant. This mechanism has already had tangible [consequences](#): the UK Embassy in Georgia was forced to cancel grants intended

to support election monitoring ahead of the October 2025 local elections.

Several prominent organizations—including the Civil Society Foundation (CSF), Transparency International Georgia (TI), International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), Social Justice Centre, Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC), Sapari, the Media Development Foundation (MDF), and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA)—have [faced](#) intrusive inspections. Courts have compelled them to hand over sensitive beneficiary data, including personal information, further threatening the security of activists.

Even crowdfunding initiatives designed to support protesters have been stifled. On the basis of a Tbilisi City Court ruling, bank accounts belonging to Nanuka's Fund (managed by journalist Nanuka Zhorzholiani), Prosperity Georgia (led by former Prime Minister Nika Gilauri), Human Rights House Tbilisi, Fund for Each Other 24/7, and the Shame Movement [were frozen](#). These funds had been used to assist individuals fined for protesting or dismissed from their jobs due to civic activism. Law enforcement authorities also raided the homes of several NGO leaders.

Meanwhile, the ruling party has moved to strengthen its own ecosystem of loyalist organizations. The Georgian Dream [allocated](#) GEL 20 million (EUR 7 million) to establish the State Grants Management Agency, designed to distribute funds to government-organized NGOs (GONGOs). In a striking irony, one of the agency's 12 funding priorities is "foreign policy and Georgia's integration into the EU." Applicants can request up to GEL 100,000 (EUR 30,000) for projects, while institutional development grants may reach GEL 700,000 (EUR 220,000).

Promoting Disinformation and Propaganda

Propaganda forms the third component of the ruling party's toolkit. The Georgian Dream relies heav-

ily on pro-government television channels such as Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, and POSTV. These outlets saturate the public with anti-European narratives while marginalizing or silencing critical voices. Given that 49 percent of Georgians [cite television](#) as their primary source of news, control of broadcast media remains essential for shaping public opinion and maintaining the ruling party's grip on power. Coverage of the European Union is framed to erode trust and discredit EU institutions, portraying them as hypocritical, guided by "double standards," and controlled by the so-called "Deep State." These channels also promote the claim that Brussels seeks to drag Georgia into war and open a "second front" against Russia—an argument designed to instill fear and undermine pro-European sentiment.

Financial support for these broadcasters is substantial, sustained mainly by Georgian Dream-affiliated businesses purchasing advertising airtime. Their [revenues](#) are robust: in the second quarter of 2025, Imedi TV earned GEL 5.4 million (EUR 1.7 million), Rustavi 2 collected GEL 2.6 million (EUR 900,000), and POSTV received GEL 1.6 million (EUR 500,000). By comparison, opposition-leaning channels earned far less—TV Pirveli took in GEL 1.6 million (EUR 500,000) and Formula TV just GEL 1.4 million (EUR 450,000). With the closure of the Mtavari TV in May 2025 following internal disputes, TV Pirveli and Formula TV now stand as the country's principal government-critical broadcasters.

Seeking to tighten control further, the Georgian Dream [amended](#) the Law on Broadcasting. The new rules [prohibit](#) foreign funding for broadcasters and expand the authority of the government-controlled Communications Commission to regulate content. Because much of Georgia's independent online media relies heavily on foreign funding, these changes threaten the survival of many critical outlets.

The Final Countdown

Yet, among Georgia's youth, the aforesaid levers are at their weakest. Unlike the business community, which survives on government tenders, and civil servants, who draw their salaries from the state, young Georgians are less tied to patronage networks. Many of them operate outside the party-state economy, studying abroad, working in the private digital sector, or building careers less reliant on state contracts. This economic independence makes them harder to co-opt or silence.

Equally, intimidation has a more limited effect on the young. Having grown up in Georgia, where protest culture is part of civic life, they are less fearful of police raids, arrests, or fines. Instead, each act of repression often galvanizes youth further, transforming punishment into proof of the regime's illegitimacy. Even the most punitive legal innovations—the treason charges, harsh fines for demonstrations, and repressive NGO legislation—have failed to break their will.

Propaganda, meanwhile, finds its least receptive audience among the younger generation. Youth consume information primarily through digital platforms and independent online outlets, not the pro-government television channels that remain dominant among older generations. Their media literacy, fluency in English, and access to international networks provide them with a resilience that older citizens lack. Rather than absorbing state-sponsored disinformation, they expose and ridicule it, spreading counter-narratives across social media.

This explains why Georgia's youth, alongside civil society organizations and the few independent media outlets left standing, form the backbone of the country's democratic resistance. They are the most immune to the Georgian Dream's authoritarian toolkit precisely because they are less dependent, less afraid, and less manipulated.

Georgia is now witnessing the longest protest movement in its modern history. The resilience of youth, civil society organizations, and independent media has so far prevented the Georgian Dream from extinguishing all dissent. Yet, their capacity to resist is not limitless.

This is also the reason why Georgia is now witnessing the longest protest movement in its modern history. The resilience of youth, civil society organizations, and independent media has so far prevented the Georgian Dream from extinguishing all dissent. Yet, their capacity to resist is not limitless. With civic space rapidly shrinking and authoritarian practices deepening, Georgia's freedom fighters urgently need support. Statements of solidarity and half measures from the international community are no longer enough. The European Union, in particular, must act decisively, offering tangible assistance to independent media, civil society organizations, and the country's youth.

This support can and must take many forms. Sanctions should be targeted not only at Georgian Dream leaders but also at their propagandists, law enforcement chiefs, and election officials—whether through EU-wide consensus or, failing that, through coalitions of willing member states. Hungary's veto can no longer be an excuse for inaction. International financial institutions should be pressed to cut budgetary support that props up the regime, while Brussels should not shy away from initiating procedures to suspend the Association Agreement ([AA](#)) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area ([DCFTA](#)), turning this into a political message rather than a bureaucratic warning. Symbolic acts—such as turning back a high-ranking Georgian Dream official at a European airport—would resonate loudly at home, undercutting the ruling party's narrative of normality.

Hungary's veto can no longer be an excuse for inaction.

Equally urgent is finding flexible ways to channel resources directly to civil society and media before they are suffocated. The recently agreed EU decision allowing selective visa-free suspensions should be used to target Georgian Dream elites and secu-

rity personnel rather than punishing the broader population.

In short, Europe must abandon hesitation and embrace resolve. Only through real action—not rhetoric—can Georgia's democratic forces hope to preserve the country's European future ■

Smart Solutions May Help Struggling Georgian Media

Mzia Amaghlobeli refused to sit down in court. Saying she would not take the seat of the accused, she endured the multi-hour ordeal of the Georgian [kangaroo court](#) despite her [failing eyesight](#) and the impact of a [hunger strike](#) she went on while in prison. She also refused a plea bargain that would mean admitting guilt, [saying](#) it was “deeply offensive” and like “being buried alive.”

Mzia Amaghlobeli’s story also resonates with what she represents. Georgia’s independent media is under assault because it poses an obstacle to the rise of autocracy and keeps alive the hope of a democratic renaissance.

The 50-something publisher and veteran journalist was arrested at a rally for posting a sticker. She says she was insulted and humiliated by the policemen and was released several hours later. When she returned to the rally, she was insulted again by

the Batumi police chief. She slapped him in return. For that offense, Amaghlobeli was thrown into jail for “assaulting a police officer,” and the prosecution demanded five years of imprisonment. After months of tense hearings during which justice and common sense were [disregarded](#) (the defense showed that in multiple cases where police officers were criminally assaulted, often with grave consequences, the assailants received only a few months in jail), she was [sentenced](#) to two years. Despite the high-profile [engagement](#) from the [media](#) and prominent [personalities](#) worldwide to release her, Amaghlobeli became Georgia’s iconic prisoner of conscience. However, Mzia Amaghlobeli’s story also resonates with what she represents. Georgia’s independent media is under assault because it poses an obstacle to the rise of autocracy and keeps alive the hope of a democratic renaissance.

Today Georgian media is at the forefront of resistance while suffering from profound internal fragility.



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Amaghlobeli's career explains this well. She founded the local newspaper, *Batumelebi*, in Georgia's Adjara province, which was dominated by the local strongman Aslan Abashidze, in 2001. She and her colleagues worked to expose the clannish nature of the regime and peer behind the façade of stability that Abashidze portrayed as his major achievement. Despite persecution, they did not relent, and when the democratic wave swept Abashidze out of office in 2004, hope for a freer, more democratic Georgia was born. Amaghlobeli and her colleagues expanded their operation in 2010, founding a nationwide paper, *Netgazeti*, and branching out into online publication with the support of the Open Society Georgia Foundation. *Netgazeti* soon became a go-to source, accompanying Georgia through decades of political tribulations. Other online media outlets have emerged and thrived as independent and increasingly professional voices, often with foreign donor support. As internet and social media penetration exploded, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) [reports](#) that 27% of Georgians used the internet in 2010 and 82% in 2023 – so did their coverage and influence.

This has been a notable development. In Georgia, it is difficult for commercial media to survive, let alone thrive. The advertising market in a country of only 3.5 million people who speak a niche language is [too small](#) and expensive to penetrate. Media and advertising products designed for other markets must be dubbed or translated, which increases costs. Despite economic growth, the returns on investment are also small and uncertain. This is why television, until recently the undisputed leader of the news market, was unable to turn a profit. Transparency International – Georgia, a watchdog, [reported](#) that none of the six leading TV stations by income turned a profit in 2022, a situation that has persisted for years, allowing tax liabilities to accumulate. This, in turn, enables the government

to [handpick](#) the channels it wants to treat leniently (or [not](#)).

As a result, commercial television in Georgia was often a plaything of the wealthy and politically connected, or even a direct vehicle of political influence. Certainly, before and after 2003, there were times when competing financial interests, relative political independence, and pluralism in the media coincided. However, media ownership and management schemes remained opaque and chaotic, as evidenced by the [legal battles](#), hostile takeovers, and internal intrigues that have plagued Georgia's two most influential TV channels, [Rustavi 2](#) and [Imedi TV](#).

After oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili took over Georgia in 2012, even this market gradually closed and became monopolized. The murky deals that governed it created an opening for Ivanishvili to take over Rustavi 2, an influential proponent of opposition views, and then [remove](#) its less influential successor, Mtavari TV, from the air through a combination of legal challenges, government harassment, and internal intrigue. The ardently pro-government Imedi TV morphed into a propaganda channel flanked by the even more radical POSTV and the slightly more palatable Rustavi 2. These three channels now [dominate](#) the national television market, [dishing out](#) Kremlin-tinted [propaganda](#) to viewers who have few, if any, alternatives. They also [dominate](#) the advertising market and lock it up for competitors.

Nevertheless, all of these channels are accumulating debt as Imedi TV's millionaire owner recently [said](#): "I never wanted to buy Imedi TV since it is not a business... it is also harming my business... either I have to close it, which is a pity because it is the largest TV, or I should sell it. Selling a loss-making company means that its buyer could only be someone who is engaged in politics in Georgia."

How often do you watch news coverage on the following TV channels? (%)

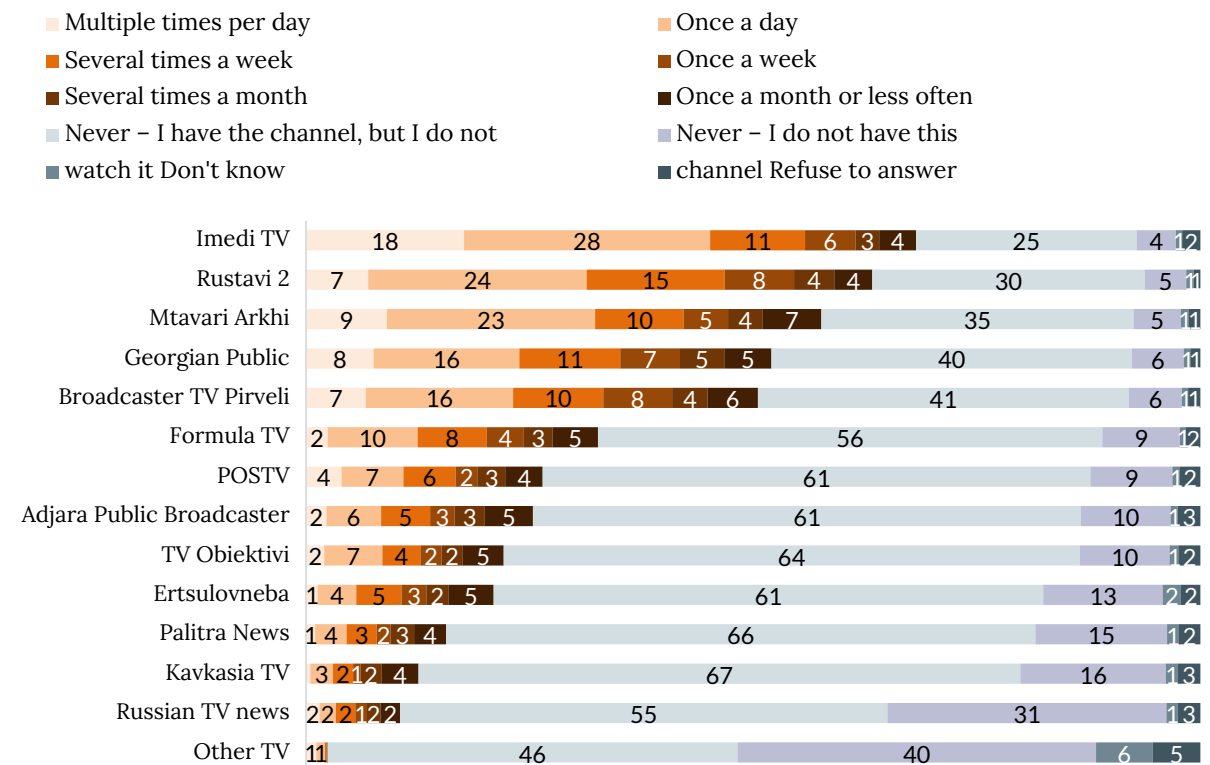


Figure 1: Government-friendly TVs dominate. Source: [2024 Georgia Media Consumption Survey \(IREX/CRRC\)](#)

The instinctive reaction of a European citizen – and of many a European bureaucrat – is to consider the idea of a public broadcaster as an antidote to a toxic market. Indeed, the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) is well endowed with GEL 82 million (EUR 26 million) [in 2025](#) from the public coffers. The GPB, which has just been given sprawling new headquarters at taxpayers' expense, operates two national TV channels, a radio station, and a website in several minority languages. Yet, it trails in viewership. Despite its management's insistence that the channel provides balanced news, stories about the firing of critical journalists and the refusal to give proportional airtime to protests in Georgia [suggest](#) otherwise. The former top manager of the GPB, appointed by the ruling party, previously served as that party's deputy chair. He now chairs the board – a career path that irks watchdogs and was [openly condemned](#) by some of the GPB's journalists.

Morphing the GPB into a “Georgian BBC” is a hopeless pipe dream. While political power is monopolized across all branches of the government, the GPB board cannot possibly be independent of the dominant political power – and it never has been.

Morphing the GPB into a “Georgian BBC” is a hopeless pipe dream. While political power is monopolized across all branches of the government, the GPB board cannot possibly be independent of the dominant political power – and it never has been. A democratic opening must precede the transformation of the GPB, and the channel itself cannot be expected to liberate itself from the chains of influence that bind it. Occasional [individual protests](#) by GPB journalists only expose this reality, but they lack transformative power.

So, what hope is there for public interest journalism in Georgia? This question brings us back to Mzia Amaghlobeli and the type of media format she pioneered. Online media is considerably less expensive to operate than television, and its audience is growing. The 2024 Georgia Media Consumption Survey [showed](#) that social media has, for the first time, overtaken television as the primary source of news (51% vs 44%). For younger Georgians, the gap is even wider. Yet, Georgians are addicted to news: 75% engage with news content at least once a day, and 44% - several times a day.

There has been a significant drop in TV dominance; 13% of people aged 18-34 trust television, according to the same survey. Many more Georgians than before say they are at least double-checking their news online. Admittedly, this statistic is somewhat misleading; many social media users still consume state propaganda from *Imedi TV* and *POSTV*. This propaganda is often amplified by government or [party-sponsored](#) social media accounts and networks of bots that social media giants regularly [take down](#), only for new ones to emerge. Nevertheless, independent online media can compete in this playing field, and it can innovate in order to capture more users with quality content.

Dramatic cuts to the USAID budget under President Donald Trump's administration have badly impacted some outlets. As expected, the EU was slow to divert money to free media before the legal environment worsened too much.

Funding patterns are clearly an issue. The government has targeted foreign-funded non-profit media by imposing legal limitations and heavy penalties on organizational grants and foreign-funded content. Dramatic cuts to the USAID budget under President Donald Trump's administration have [badly impacted](#) some outlets. As expected, the EU

was slow to divert money to free media before the legal environment worsened too much. Now, the EU is struggling to navigate the plethora of repressive laws and establish a credible funding scheme in order to continue supporting Georgian media.

Most online media outlets know they are living on borrowed time. Twenty-two such media organizations have launched a public fundraising [campaign](#), "Lights Must Stay On!", as a means to survive, and many others are undertaking similar efforts individually. However, they are all tapping into the same subscriber base, which consists mainly of liberal-minded émigrés whose pockets are not deep enough to sustain the diverse ecosystem of Georgia's free media.

Georgian online media outlets need to adapt to this reality. There are things Georgia's friends could also do, but this would require adjustments in thinking, policy, and practice.

First, it is essential to recognize that subsidizing public interest media is a necessity, given Georgia's political and economic realities. There are no miracle solutions to ensure the sustainability of public interest media based solely on subscriptions or advertisements. They can at best furnish only complementary revenue streams.

Second, it must be understood that such subsidies are investments, not charity. This investment will be recuperated over time through more transparent politics and a more predictable business environment.

Third, while the current media landscape is fragmented, forcing consolidation or collaboration is unlikely to be effective. Conversely, nudging and encouraging the formation of natural alliances and partnerships between newsrooms is worthwhile and may lead to increased efficiency and better-quality alternatives for end-users in the medium term.

Most importantly, anyone trying to help Georgian media outlets must keep in mind that things could go terribly wrong at any moment for Georgian journalists.

Fourth and most importantly, anyone trying to help Georgian media outlets must keep in mind that things could go terribly wrong at any moment for Georgian journalists. Still, the authorities have not crossed the point of no return just yet and the media continues operating. The short-term course of action should aim to ensure survival if most journalists can no longer operate freely in Georgia (i.e., a Belarusian or Russian scenario) and create foundations for sustainability if Georgia continues to balance on the brink for some time.

In practice, rather than engaging in “drip-feeding” multiple outlets through fragmented grant schemes, the European Union and other like-minded donors should borrow a page from their own approaches to other issues. For example, the “Team Europe” approach has been adopted by the EU to integrate national and EU-wide funding schemes, thereby maximizing their impact. The “blending” approach by the EU combines development assistance from the EU with financial/business development instruments provided by the EBRD or the World Bank.

These approaches could be used and combined to create an investment vehicle to support independent newsrooms as commercial entities, functioning like a benevolent publishing house. Such experiments have previously been done by private

actors backing the Media Development Investment Fund ([MDIF](#)), which runs [Pluralis](#), a publishing company.

A financial instrument could be established in the form of an endowment with a self-governing superstructure involving Georgian media outlets. This superstructure would review, approve, and finance projects in the public interest on a competitive basis.

Additionally, a financial instrument could be established in the form of an endowment with a self-governing superstructure involving Georgian media outlets. This superstructure would review, approve, and finance projects in the public interest on a competitive basis. The outcome would essentially be similar to EU-wide Arte public broadcasting but applied to a single country. The advantage of this model is that it can function inside the country, if the political environment is conducive, or outside of it, should the situation deteriorate.

Georgia's democracy and statehood are currently in an existential crisis. Yet, the resistance it encounters from Georgians in all walks of life and from journalists like Mzia Amaghlobeli contains the seeds that may grow and overcome the fundamental causes of the present impasse. If they grasp the emergency, but get into a creative, rather than a catastrophic mode, Georgia's partners can help ensure that these seeds fall on fertile, cultivated soil ■

A Sink or Swim Moment for Georgia's Opposition

Georgia's opposition today stands at its weakest since independence. State repression, deliberate fragmentation, and internal missteps have left it marginalized, disoriented, and facing possible elimination. The old question — whether the opposition can win — has given way to a starker one: whether it can survive at all.

Since 2012, the Georgian Dream has [built](#) an authoritarian one-party state that dominates courts and media, weaponizes state institutions, and borrows freely from the Russian playbook of outlawing real competitors. For now, token competition remains, but by 2026, Georgia may be left only with regime-approved parties and an underground opposition.

The coming months are decisive. The October 2025 local elections, the protests that will follow, and the approach to 2026 will determine whether Georgia still has a democratic alternative or slides

into consolidated authoritarianism. For the opposition, unity is no longer optional but existential — and it cannot be improvised months before a vote. It must begin now: joint fundraising, coordinated messaging, and a credible program that shows change means competence, not chaos. Yet, history suggests such unification will be painfully difficult.

For Georgia's Western partners, however, this opposition — fractured and self-defeating as it may be — is still the only democratic, pro-European alternative. Alongside critical media and civil society, it remains the last barrier to authoritarian consolidation. Its flaws cannot justify Western disengagement.

For Georgia's Western partners, however, this opposition — fractured and self-defeating as it may be — is still the only democratic, pro-European



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alternative. Alongside critical media and civil society, it remains the last barrier to authoritarian consolidation. Its flaws cannot justify Western disengagement. To withhold support because the opposition is not “perfect” would be to hand Bidzina Ivanishvili what he seeks: a monopoly at home and isolation abroad. In hybrid regimes, one does not choose the opposition one would like — one works with the opposition that exists.

Weak But Still a Force to Reckon With

The Georgian opposition in 2025 is perhaps the weakest it has been since independence. Yet, it remains a serious obstacle to the one-party system Ivanishvili seeks to cement. Past rulers also enjoyed dominance — Shevardnadze over fractious warlords, Saakashvili after the Rose Revolution over the splintered opposition parties — but never has the political field been so full of alternatives and, at the same time, so short on resources and strategy. The Georgian Dream has perfected not just the art of winning elections but of steadily eroding and, if trends hold, eliminating opposition as a viable force altogether.

The strategy begins with leadership. Georgia's prisons [hold](#) nearly every central pro-European party leader: Mikheil Saakashvili, Giorgi Vashadze, Nika Gvaramia, Nika Melia, and Zurab Japaridze. Lelo's Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze were [freed](#) only recently; Giorgi Gakharia remains in [self-exile](#) in Germany. Others still operate in Tbilisi but in disarray, while Salome Zourabichvili tries, awkwardly, to fill the vacuum. The consequences have a ripple effect: weak political leadership cripples protests, discourages younger activists, and reinforces the sense that politics leads to prison, not power.

Finances, or the lack thereof, tighten the noose further. Boycotts deprived parties of state sub-

sidies, and donors have taken a pause, while the Georgian Dream weaponizes the state budget to bankroll the ruling party and uses state institutions to bankrupt rivals. In 2024, it outspent all opponents three to one; the pattern is repeating in 2025. The media landscape completes the picture. *Imedi TV*, *POSTV*, *the Public Broadcaster*, and *Rustavi 2*, together with social media propaganda, brand the opposition as corrupt, chaotic, reckless, and foreign-controlled. Exploiting national traumas, the Georgian Dream frames itself as promoting peace and stability while the opposition is portrayed as advocating war and chaos.

To be sure, opposition mistakes have worsened the crisis — splintering into rival factions, boycotts that backfired, coalitions that collapsed under egos. However, these missteps occurred on a battlefield already tilted: leaders were jailed, coffers were empty, and the media was hostile. Against those odds, errors became near-fatal. Still, the opposition endures, surviving in fragile coalitions that keep alive, however tenuously, the possibility of democratic resistance.

Horizons of the Opposition — Elections, Protests, and the Specter of Outlawing

Every political movement lives under horizons — near and distant events that shape its fate. For Georgia's opposition in 2025, those horizons are vivid: the release of imprisoned leaders in early 2026, the 4 October elections, the protests that will follow, and the looming possibility of outright outlawing sometime this fall.

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Georgia's opposition in 2025, those horizons are vivid: the release of imprisoned leaders in early 2026, the 4 October elections, the protests that will follow, and the looming possibility of outright outlawing sometime this fall. Together, they will decide whether Georgia remains pluralist or drifts into full authoritarianism.

The first horizon is the release of jailed leaders. Figures like Giorgi Vashadze, Nika Gvaramia, Nika Melia, and Zurab Japaridze could return to political life with the legitimacy of martyrdom but only next year. Yet, their comeback could just as easily reignite rivalries that have long plagued the opposition. The choice is between unity and renewed fragmentation. Vashadze and Japaridze [called](#) for unity from prison but this has not been received positively by all political parties. Thus, those political parties that are now active might not necessarily embrace the returned politicians' ideas for unity or follow their lead.

The second horizon is 4 October 2025 – local elections, [boycotted](#) by all pro-Western opposition parties, [but](#) Lelo – Strong Georgia and Gakharia's For Georgia. No one expects a fair contest: the Georgian Dream dominates state resources, commissions, media, and disinformation. They have unlimited access to the personal data of voters, including those currently abroad. They can easily manipulate this information to run local campaigns, especially since foreign-based Georgians do not vote in local elections. The likeliest outcome will be a vote marred by irregularities and denounced by the opposition. But that is not new. With the major opposition parties boycotting the elections, a critically minded electorate will stay home so the Georgian Dream's efforts will be significantly less than in October 2024.

The local elections are always won in Georgia by the winners of previous parliamentary elections – that is a rule, a tradition of a sort. The only time in recent history when the local elections had na-

tional importance was in 2021 when the [return](#) of Mikheil Saakashvili galvanized the political process. But even then, the opposition could not do better than to win just one municipality and local councils in several cities. This time around, the opposition will not even come close to the results of 2021. This is also because those elections saw a high participation rate since the preceding [Charles Michel agreement](#) provided for the possibility to call parliamentary elections if the ruling party did not clear 43% nationwide vote.

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That brings us to the third horizon: the streets. In Georgia, elections rarely conclude at the ballot box; they often spill over into protest. For mobilization to succeed this time, three ingredients are indispensable: unity among opposition forces, disciplined non-violent tactics, and defections from within state structures. Without these, the Georgian Dream's repressive arsenal – arrests, harassment of NGOs, intimidation of journalists – will again dismantle demonstrations just as it has done before.

The 4 October protest is already shaping up as a pivotal moment. Two figures, the United National Movement's (UNM) Levan Khabeishvili and former opera singer Paata Burchuladze, [have emerged](#) as its visible leaders – and they will almost certainly be among the first targets for arrest if the protest turns violent. Yet, preparations are underway regardless: a rally on 13 September as a precursor followed by a massive demonstration on election day itself.

The stakes are made explicit in the rhetoric on both sides. The opposition's promo for 4 October is nothing less than a "peaceful overthrow of Ivan-

ishvili's regime." The regime's counter-message is equally [blunt](#): step outside the bounds of legality and arrests will follow. Georgia is thus set on a collision course — one that will test not only the opposition's resolve but also the regime's capacity to contain dissent without tipping into outright authoritarian violence.

Finally comes the most ominous horizon: outlawing. After 4 October when the dust settles, the Georgian Dream will utilize the legal tools it [developed](#) earlier this year to dissolve opposition parties, a move reminiscent of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko or Russian President Vladimir Putin. The investigative [report](#) of the Tsulukiani Commission set the ground for that. As Georgian Dream leaders [have claimed](#), they will address the Constitutional Court with the request to ban pro-European political parties. The Court will likely follow the suit.

Each horizon is also a cliff. To survive, the opposition must prepare now: build unity before leaders walk free, organize resilient protests after the elections, demonstrate that boycotted elections are deeply flawed, plan disciplined protests, establish regional outreach, and prepare legal defenses against dissolution. Without this preparation, the horizons will not open doors but close them — leaving Georgia with the façade of democracy and the reality of an uncontested one-party rule.

The Faces Behind the Bars

Authoritarian regimes often believe that by imprisoning their opponents, they remove them from politics. Yet, history shows that prison can give politicians symbolic capital that no campaign could buy. In Georgia today, this paradox defines the opposition. Many of its most prominent leaders are behind bars — removed from the daily grind of politics, yet still serving as the faces of repression and resilience.

History shows that prison can give politicians symbolic capital that no campaign could buy. In Georgia today, this paradox defines the opposition. Many of its most prominent leaders are behind bars — removed from the daily grind of politics, yet still serving as the faces of repression and resilience.

The most famous of these, of course, is Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's third president and the man whose name still dominates the political imagination two decades after the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili has been both the great hope and the great liability of Georgia's democratic opposition. To his admirers, he remains the modernizer who broke the back of corruption, built functioning institutions, and tied Georgia's fate to the Euro-Atlantic world. To his critics, he is the authoritarian reformer who governed with an iron hand, trampled civil liberties, and dragged Georgia into an unwinnable war in 2008. Since his dramatic return to Georgia in 2021 — a move that ended in arrest — Saakashvili has embodied both defiance and tragedy. His imprisonment under conditions described by the European Parliament as degrading has made him a cause célèbre in Western capitals. Yet, inside Georgia, his polarizing legacy still splits the opposition camp: some believe his eventual release will electrify the resistance. In contrast, others fear it will re-polarize society and hand the Georgian Dream the perfect scapegoat. Saakashvili remains, in every sense, the ghost in the machine of Georgian politics — present even in absence.

Nika Gvaramia, a leader of the *Ahali* party and *Coalition for Change*, symbolizes a different trajectory: that of the media fighter turned political prisoner. Once a lawyer and politician, Gvaramia became best known as the director of *Rustavi 2* and later the founder of *Mtavari Arkhi*, Georgia's most influential opposition television channel which is now

off the air. His imprisonment in 2022 on absurd charges was widely condemned by Human Rights Watch, the EU, and the U.S. State Department as politically motivated. He was even [awarded](#) the 2023 International Press Freedom Award. For many Georgians, his case was the clearest sign that the Georgian Dream would stop at nothing to muzzle dissenting voices. Ironically, by locking him up, the government transformed him from a media manager into a political figure. In the 2024 elections, Gvaramia's party – Coalition for Change [managed](#) to win the largest share of opposition votes. His party, however, has struggled significantly since three of its four leaders are currently behind bars.

Standing (or sitting) alongside him in both resistance and imprisonment is Nika Melia, the fiery former chair of the UNM and another co-leader of the *Coalition for Change*. Melia has become synonymous with protest politics in Georgia. Arrested multiple times, he is perhaps most remembered for 2021 when his detention on dubious charges prompted the resignation of then Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia who refused to oversee the crackdown. Melia is not a strategist or a policy wonk nor is he an ideologist; he is a mobilizer, a man who can fill the squares and keep crowds energized. His strength is also his weakness: his confrontational style makes him an easy target for the Georgian Dream's propaganda which paints him as a reckless radical. Yet, his endurance through years of arrests and harassment has given him a credibility no one can deny. In a future coalition, Melia may not be the one to craft a governing program but he could be indispensable as the opposition's chief mobilizer – the one who can channel anger into disciplined pressure.

Another figure with significant moral capital, albeit far less mass appeal, save among the youth, is Zurab Japaridze, the libertarian founder of *Girchi – More Freedom* and *Girchi* before that. Japaridze's politics often seem eccentric in a Georgian con-

text – advocating for marijuana legalization, radical economic liberalism, and limited government – but his reputation for honesty is unmatched. He is often described, even by critics, as the most principled politician in Georgia. Unlike many of his peers, he has consistently called for unity and criticized the opposition's obsession with personalities. His voter base is small but growing and his influence in shaping discourse is larger than numbers suggest. In many ways, Japaridze represents the conscience of the opposition – a reminder that integrity still matters. His time in prison, while less publicized than Saakashvili's or Gvaramia's, nonetheless strengthens his role as a bridge-builder who might coax rival camps toward cooperation.

The case of Giorgi Vashadze, leader of *Strategy the Builder*, illustrates another dimension of repression. Once an energetic coalition-maker, he, just like Japaridze, Melia, and Gvaramia, is now serving a sentence for not showing up at the parliamentary investigative commission. Ironically, Vashadze never held a position higher than deputy minister of justice during the Saakashvili administration and his work was closely tied to the development of the now-famous and pride-worthy civil registry, Public Service Halls, and Houses of Justice. Vashadze lacks the national brand of Saakashvili or the media power of Gvaramia but his organizational skills and willingness to work with others make him valuable. He is one of the few politicians who constantly advocate for unity. The relatively successful presidential campaign of the UNM's Gregory Vashadze in 2018 was also because Giorgi Vashadze served as his campaign chief. His imprisonment, like that of others, signals the Georgian Dream's strategy of decapitating all political leaders who keep movements together. For the opposition, his release could be important in terms of energy and stitching fragmented groups into a larger front.

If Gvaramia and Melia embody the resistance wing, and Japaridze and Vashadze represent the principled coalition-makers, then Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze have personified the failed promise of a centrist technocratic alternative. As founders of *Lelo* — both former banking executives — they arrived in politics aiming to spark a “Georgian Macron moment,” offering a pragmatic, pro-European option for the middle class and those who wanted neither the Georgian Dream nor the UNM. For a fleeting moment, they appeared to capture the hopes of voters disillusioned with both parties. But their campaign quickly unraveled: oversized local spending, alienation of street protest groups, and a confusing flirtation with Gakharia’s faction all estranged their base. Their imprisonment in June seemed to add a layered complexity—providing a symbolic claim to victimhood, yet happening on the back of a strategic misstep to partake in local elections which undermined confidence in *Lelo*’s seriousness and even split the party.

Then, in early September, President Kavelashvili pardoned both Khazaradze and Japaridze ahead of the 4 October local elections. Their release—while undeniably politically motivated—now poses a new question: is their pardon and return a shrewd maneuver positioning *Lelo* as the regime’s permitted opposition? Khazaradze himself dismissed the pardon, calling it a step aimed at sowing division among the opposition, insisting that unless all political prisoners are freed equally the gesture exposes the regime’s manipulation.

While not behind bars, there is also another oppressed political leader — Giorgi Gakharia, who represents another form of repression — opposition in exile. The former prime minister and founder of *For Georgia* now resides in Germany on a long-term visa avoiding what his allies call politically motivated prosecutions. He insists he has not sought asylum but uses his base in Berlin to work on EU integration issues and keep ties with

international partners. From abroad, he has stayed engaged in Georgian politics, warning against “uncontrolled chaos” and coordinating his party’s strategy even as investigations at home hang over him.

His exile, however, has polarized opinion. The Georgian Dream dismisses him as a coward, “counselling Georgians from Germany.” At the same time, some opposition leaders accuse him of fleeing responsibility and even contrast him to Saakashvili who actually returned to Georgia. Yet, many observers note that distance may be the only thing keeping him out of prison: probes into his past as interior minister and his handling of the 2019 protests could easily have led to charges if he returned. Gakharia thus stands as a symbol of a different kind of opposition silencing — not jailed, but effectively pushed out of the country, forced to choose between political relevance at home and personal safety abroad.

Taken together, these political figures embody the diversity — and dysfunction — of Georgia’s opposition. They span the spectrum: reformist presidents, media warriors, protest leaders, libertarians, coalition-makers, technocrats. Their imprisonment is meant to neutralize them but it also creates a pantheon of political victims that the Georgian Dream cannot entirely control. When they are released, likely in stages through 2026, the opposition will face a critical choice: treat them as rivals in a renewed scramble for dominance or integrate them into a leadership cabinet that symbolizes unity in diversity.

Prison has not only weakened the opposition; it has offered one last chance to recognize that their struggle is not about personalities but about preserving the democratic space itself.

The danger, of course, is that old patterns will re-

turn. Saakashvili's polarizing aura could reanimate the "anti-Misha" vote and scare moderates. Melia's street-first approach could alienate cautious centrists. Khazaradze's pragmatic survivalism could be read as opportunism. Without a unifying mechanism, the release of these leaders could split the opposition even more. Yet, the opportunity is just as real. Their combined legitimacy as political prisoners, their symbolic authority, and their different skill sets could form the nucleus of a truly broad coalition — if, and only if, they are willing to subsume ego for survival. In this sense, prison has not only weakened the opposition; it has offered one last chance to recognize that their struggle is not about personalities but about preserving the democratic space itself.

Lessons from a Decade of Fragmentation

For more than a decade, Georgia's opposition has replayed the same debate: unite behind one banner or diversify into multiple parties. Each cycle has tilted toward fragmentation and each has ended the same way — the Georgian Dream entrenched in power, the opposition scattered and defeated.

The logic of diversification once seemed persuasive. The UNM, burdened by Saakashvili's polarizing legacy, could not mobilize all anti-Georgian Dream voters; new parties were meant to capture the disillusioned middle. From Alasania and Burchuladze in 2016 to European Georgia in 2017 and later *Lelo*, *Girchi*, and *Strategy the Builder*, each experiment promised renewal. None succeeded. The votes split and the Georgian Dream tightened its grip.

The 2020 elections starkly revealed this flaw. Opposition parties together won nearly half the vote but still handed the Georgian Dream an easy majority. The boycott that followed only deepened their weakness, costing them institutional leverage and financing. The 2024 elections added insult: the

UNM [lost](#) its primacy to the *Coalition for Change* but the opposition bloc as a whole did not grow. It simply reshuffled itself while the Georgian Dream remained secure.

The lesson is clear. Diversification has not expanded the electorate or persuaded the undecided. It has drained resources, confused voters, and guaranteed defeat. Unity is not easy — the UNM remains toxic for many, egos abound, coalitions often look artificial — but disunity is suicidal.

What makes 2025 different is the cost of failure. In earlier years, defeat meant another cycle in opposition. Today, it could mean extinction. With the ["foreign agents" law](#) and [captured courts](#), the Georgian Dream has the legal tools to dissolve parties altogether. If opposition leaders enter 2026 divided, they risk not just another electoral loss (whenever the elections come) but the elimination of pluralism itself.

For the first time since independence, the opposition is not merely split into two or three factions but into four distinct centers of gravity. Each of these poles claims to embody the democratic alternative, cultivating its own identity and narrative, and insisting that the others are compromised or inadequate. Together, they form what should be a diverse coalition capable of representing every segment of Georgian society. Separately, they form a mosaic of weakness that only strengthens the Georgian Dream's hand.

The most visible and dynamic of these centers is the *Coalition for Change*, anchored by Nika Gvaramia and Nika Melia, and flanked by Elene Khoshtaria's *Droa* and Zurab Japaridze's *Girchi – More Freedom*. This bloc emerged from the frustrations of 2024 when Gvaramia and Melia successfully outpolled the once-dominant UNM, proving that the old hegemon could be displaced. In form and rhetoric, the *Coalition for Change* is the closest thing Georgia has to a movement rather than just a party. Its leaders

speak the language of protest, youth, and Europe. Its voter base is concentrated in Tbilisi and other urban centers where young professionals, students, and the pro-European middle class resonate with its message. Gvaramia's background in media gives the coalition constant visibility while Melia's skill as a protest leader ensures its capacity to mobilize crowds. Yet, for all its energy, the coalition has limitations. Its reach into rural Georgia is thin, its leaders' egos clash, and its protest-oriented politics often alienate cautious moderates. The coalition embodies the promise of a new generation but without broader infrastructure, it risks becoming another urban phenomenon unable to break the Georgian Dream's hold on the countryside. In addition, three of its four leaders are currently behind bars.

The second pole, the *United National Movement*, still matters despite its decline. The UNM is no longer the central opposition party it once was; its 2024 electoral humiliation confirmed as much. But it remains the only party with a truly national footprint. Across Georgia's regions, the UNM retains offices, activists, and local structures that no other opposition party can match. Its brand might be toxic but its machine still exists. Approximately 10-15% (used to be a solid 25%) of Georgians [remain](#) loyal to the UNM despite its controversies. This core ensures its continued relevance. Yet, the UNM suffers from the same problems that have haunted it since 2012: its association with Saakashvili's polarizing rule, its failure to counter toxic propaganda, and its inability to shed the image of authoritarian excess. In polls, the UNM consistently registers among the most disliked parties, a fact that the Georgian Dream exploits relentlessly. Still, dismissing the UNM as irrelevant would be a mistake. Any serious opposition coalition will have to incorporate its structures, its activists, and its base — while somehow containing the toxicity of its brand.

The third center is the bloc formed by *Lelo* and Giorgi Gakharia's *For Georgia* party. Once imagined

as the great centrist alternative, this grouping has withered, yet it clings to relevance. *Lelo*, founded by Khazaradze and Japaridze, entered politics promising technocratic competence and business-friendly reform. Gakharia, as a former prime minister who [broke](#) with the Georgian Dream in 2021, positioned himself as the pragmatic, security-minded centrist who could appeal to moderates. For a moment, this seemed like a formula capable of attracting voters weary of both the Georgian Dream and the UNM. But the experiment faltered. *Lelo* overspent in local elections, alienated protesters, and confused its base by cozying up to Gakharia. Gakharia himself never shook off the stigma of the dispersal of the 20 June protests, leaving many to doubt his democratic credentials. Today, this bloc's strengths lie not in mass mobilization but in networks of business elites, technocrats, and international credibility. They are weak at the grassroots level, mistrusted by much of the protest camp, yet not entirely irrelevant. Their survival strategy seems to be positioning themselves as the “reasonable” opposition — but in a context where the Georgian Dream has moved to outlaw dissent, such moderation risks irrelevance.

Finally, there is the loosely knit coalition known as “*The Eight*,” orbiting around President Salome Zourabichvili. Of all the opposition poles, this one is the vaguest, yet it highlights a critical fact: some form of institutional opposition still survives. Although elected with the Georgian Dream's backing, Zourabichvili has steadily broken with the ruling party, [vetoing controversial laws](#) and voicing [criticisms](#) that have won her cautious respect in opposition circles. Her allies — from *Ahali* and *Droa* to the *Federalists*, *Freedom Square*, and the remnants of *European Georgia* — position themselves as a bridge between the street opposition and the presidency.

Their strength lies less in mobilizing crowds than in offering institutional legitimacy. As a former head of state with French citizenship and deep diplomatic ties, Zourabichvili is a valuable interlocutor

in Brussels, Paris, and Washington. Yet, “*The Eight*” is fragile: lacking local structures, organizational architecture, a unifying leader, or a clear narrative, the grouping risks sliding into irrelevance unless folded into a broader umbrella coalition.

What makes this fourfold fragmentation so dangerous is not just the division of votes but the division of narratives. Georgians do not hear a unified story about what the opposition stands for; they hear competing, sometimes contradictory tales. The *Coalition for Change* claims to be the fresh alternative. The UNM insists it remains the only true national force. Lelo and Gakharia claim to be the pragmatic, centrist fix. Zourabichvili’s allies emphasize moderation and institutionalism. To the average voter, this cacophony reinforces the Georgian Dream’s narrative: that the opposition is disorganized, selfish, and incapable of governing.

And yet, paradoxically, the fragmentation also reveals potential. Taken together, the four poles cover almost every demographic in Georgian society. Urban liberals find their voice in the *Coalition for Change*. Rural loyalists still align with the UNM. Middle-class moderates might identify with Lelo or Gakharia. Institutionalists and diplomatic elites gravitate toward Zourabichvili. The map is not one of irrelevance; it is one of misalignment. If these centers could be brought under one umbrella, they would form the broadest coalition in Georgia’s history — representing youth and age, city and countryside, radicals and moderates. The very diversity that now divides them could, under the right framework, become a strength.

The question is whether that transformation is possible. Georgian politics has never lacked for talk of unity but efforts have usually collapsed under the weight of egos, historical grudges, and tactical disagreements. Each center believes it has a claim to primacy. Each fears being swallowed by the others. The Georgian Dream understands this and actively fuels rivalries, amplifying the idea that unity is

both impossible and undesirable. Yet, the stakes in 2025 are different. In earlier years, fragmentation meant defeat but it also meant survival. Today, fragmentation could mean annihilation. If the Georgian Dream proceeds with outlawing genuine opposition parties, there may be no second chances.

The Morning After 4 October: What Can and Probably Will Not Be Done

For years, opposition unity in Georgia has existed more in rhetoric than in practice. Before every election, party leaders spoke of it as a necessity, even an inevitability. Yet, each cycle ended the same: rivalries hardened, egos clashed, tactical disagreements overwhelmed strategy, and hastily arranged pacts collapsed under the first pressure. Unity became ritual rather than reality, a hollow prayer whispered before predictable defeat.

But 2025 is not 2016, nor even 2020 and 2024. This time, the stakes are existential. The Georgian Dream has built an architecture of repression that leaves no room for repeated mistakes.

But 2025 is not 2016, nor even 2020 and 2024. This time, the stakes are existential. The Georgian Dream has built an [architecture of repression](#) that leaves no room for repeated mistakes. With over 20 repressive laws passed, the Foreign Agents Law in force, the Anti-Corruption Bureau repurposed as a weapon, the judiciary and electoral commissions captured, and the media ecosystem dominated, disunity no longer means another cycle in opposition. It means extinction, outlawing, exile, or silence.

The reasons are plain. Repression has already gutted opposition leadership with some jailed and others forced abroad. A fragmented opposition gives the Georgian Dream easy targets — one par-

ty banned here, another harassed there. A united front would make such repression far harder to justify and resilience would be stronger. Public fatigue compounds the danger: most Georgians now tell pollsters they view the opposition as divided and ineffective. A broad coalition, visible and credible, is the only thing that can restore faith in alternatives. International impatience seals the argument. Brussels and Washington have grown weary of actors too weak and divided to be taken seriously. A united opposition could attract real pressure on the Georgian Dream; a divided one will be ignored.

Yet unity, even if achieved, is not enough. Georgians are skeptical not just because parties are divided but because they doubt the opposition can govern. Protests, boycotts, and hunger strikes do not build trust in competence. The Georgian Dream has skillfully portrayed itself as the only force capable of keeping the lights on, paying pensions, and maintaining “stability.” Unless the opposition proves otherwise, voters will continue to settle for the devil they know.

That proof must come through a credible government-in-waiting: an umbrella coalition anchored in shared principles of democracy, European integration, and power-sharing, reinforced by a program of competence. Such a government-in-waiting also needs very bold ideas for a program. The myth of a messiah must finally be abandoned. Georgia will not produce another Saakashvili nor does it need to. Instead, it needs a leadership cabinet representing all wings. Such a cabinet would diffuse egos, project inclusivity, and assure voters that no single faction could hijack power.

This leadership must also be visible. A Common Assembly, televised and regular, could allow Georgians to witness something they have never seen: their politicians debating in public, disagreeing openly, and yet deciding collectively. In a society cynical about politics, this spectacle of transparent deliberation could be revolutionary. This could also

serve as a ground for genuine primaries – granted that there will still be elections to contest.

To win — or even to survive — the opposition must do the hard work of politics: raising money, mapping voters, tailoring messages, and embedding itself in daily life across the country.

But leadership and transparency are still only the framework. To win — or even to survive — the opposition must do the hard work of politics: raising money, mapping voters, tailoring messages, and embedding itself in daily life across the country. Here, the failures of the past are most glaring. In 2024, the Georgian Dream outspent the opposition three to one. Unless opposition parties pool resources into a single campaign fund and share infrastructure — one office per district, staffed jointly — they will starve again. Diaspora communities, long underutilized, could be mobilized but only if they are convinced that their money supports unity rather than factional vanity projects. If the opposition cannot unite its wallets, why should voters believe it can unite the country?

The next step is understanding the electorate. For too long, opposition slogans have been generic — democracy, Europe, anti-corruption. These are important but polls show voters care most about jobs, healthcare, pensions, and poverty. The opposition must tailor its messages. Fear of war — the Georgian Dream’s strongest narrative — must be met not with denial but with reframing. Unlike the Georgian Dream, which has produced nothing from its bilateral channel with Russia, opposition leaders can point to real experience: the 2005 base [withdrawal](#), [the WTO deal](#), and the [Geneva talks](#) that followed in 2008. The message must be clear: the Georgian Dream appeases Russia; we can negotiate with Russia.

Finally, the opposition must outweigh the Georgian Dream socially. Elections are not just about ballots

but about legitimacy. The ruling party mobilizes networks of teachers, public employees, and pensioners through fear and patronage. To counter this, the opposition must embed itself in daily life: in schools, unions, professional associations, student groups, and villages. It must not only fill Tbilisi squares but also sit in village kitchens and town halls, listening and persuading.

Time is the most precious resource. The Georgian Dream campaigns years in advance; the opposition scrambles only in the final months. That must change. Whether national elections happen in 2026, 2027, or 2028, the opposition must treat them as imminent. Campaigning cannot be episodic; it must be continuous. Outreach cannot be reactive; it must be permanent. Resources must be budgeted not just for one campaign but for an indefinite struggle. A long game means planning for surprises with contingency strategies from Plan A through Plan Z. Anything less is surrender.

What can be done, then, is clear: build an umbrella coalition, present a credible program, pool resources, map voters, craft disciplined narratives, and begin campaigning now across the entire country. What probably will not be done is also clear: egos will resist dilution, parties will hoard resources, messaging will scatter, and the habit of improvisation will prevail. But the difference in 2025 is that failure carries a finality it never did before. If unity and competence are not achieved, the opposition will not simply lose another election. It will vanish.

The task of saving Georgia, therefore, cannot be postponed again. Whether elections come in 2028 as scheduled or earlier in a manufactured crisis, the opposition must be ready. Ready with structures in every region, with a single fund, with a disciplined message, with a government-in-waiting. Ready to survive repression, ready to counter propaganda, ready to show Georgians they have a real choice. The opposition must replicate what Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan did before de-

throning Armen Sarkissian and the Republican Party in Armenia or what Peter Magyar is now doing in Hungary – but it needs to be done on a grander and longer scale.

The choice is really simple. The 4 October rally is a good idea – it could lead to mass mobilization and serious pressure on Ivanishvili. However, there will be a morning after and if the planned “peaceful revolution” is unsuccessful, the opposition needs to switch to Plan B and then Plan C. But these plans must be prepared now. If not, history will not wait. Nor will Ivanishvili.

Georgia's Western partners must accept a difficult truth: the opposition they have is the opposition that exists. It is fractured, imperfect, often self-destructive – yet it remains the only genuinely pro-European, democratic force left standing against the consolidation of one-party rule.

At the same time, Georgia's Western partners must accept a difficult truth: the opposition they have is the opposition that exists. It is fractured, imperfect, often self-destructive – yet it remains the only genuinely pro-European, democratic force left standing against the consolidation of one-party rule. To withhold support because these forces are messy or divided would be to hand Ivanishvili a monopoly on legitimacy. The EU and the United States cannot afford “Georgia fatigue.” Even flawed actors deserve backing if they are the last barrier between the country and authoritarianism. Media, civil society, and opposition parties must all remain part of the democratic ecosystem that the West continues to fund and defend. For, in hybrid regimes, the choice is not between the ideal opposition and a bad one. The choice is between supporting flawed democrats or abandoning the field to autocrats ■

Legitimacy Crisis and the False Dilemma of Western Engagement with Georgia

The recent Washington summit, where Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev [took the spotlight](#), highlighted a sobering reality that Georgia is fully absent from the region's most critical diplomatic conversations.

That silence has resonated with experts and regional observers, raising unsettling questions: Can the Georgian Dream government still repair its fraying ties with Western partners or has the point of no return already been crossed? Can Georgia withstand the gravitational pull of Russia's tightening sphere of influence? And most importantly, how can Western allies best support the Georgian people as they struggle through this mounting crisis?

The sense of unease following the omission of the issue of Georgia from the Washington discussions inflamed more profound anxiety about the country's strategic position, stirring doubts about whether or not Georgia is becoming sidelined by new regional realities or, worse, lost in the ever-shifting game of great power rivalry. These questions are not theoretical; they strike at the heart of not only Georgia's aspirations for democracy and its Euro-Atlantic ambitions but also territorial integrity and sovereignty.

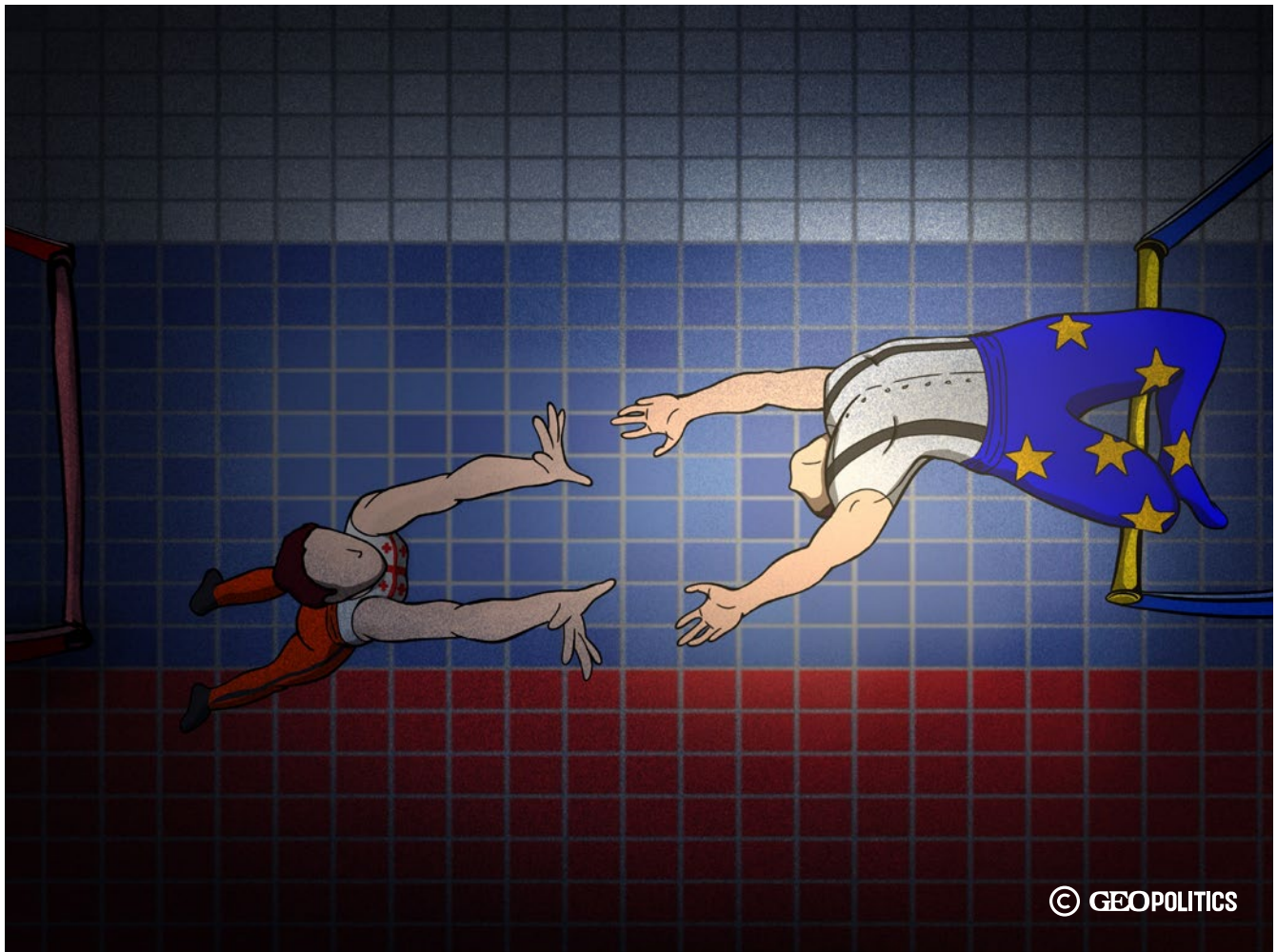
Regional Context: Chess with No Rules

For years, Russian influence in its European neighborhood was steadily growing. Moscow skillfully



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expanded its reach by weaponizing frozen conflicts, energy dependencies, and its historical ties to regional actors, all of which reinforced its leverage across the post-Soviet space. In the South Caucasus, Russia maintained a firm grip by its strategic presence in Armenia, its manipulation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and its persistent occupation of Georgia's territories.

For years, even as Russian influence intensified, Georgia stood firm against Kremlin pressure, pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration and policies to safeguard its independence.

For years, even as Russian influence intensified, Georgia stood firm against Kremlin pressure, pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration and policies to safeguard its independence. Yet, in a dramatic reversal, Georgia gave up its defenses when Russia's

full-scale invasion of Ukraine proved so costly and overreaching that it drained Moscow's resources, exposed its strategic weaknesses, and shattered the illusion of regional dominance. The result was not merely a decline in influence but the collapse of long-standing leverages. Nowhere was this collapse more evident than in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Russia's grip was broken and its ability to dictate outcomes for Armenia and Azerbaijan came to a decisive end.

The recent U.S.-brokered agreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan mark a turning point for the South Caucasus and the wider region. The new peace deal ended Russia's monopoly on security and connectivity issues, dismantled its role in conflict resolution through making the OSCE Minsk format obsolete, and paved the way for genuine reconciliation.

The TRIPP (Trump Route for International Peace

and Prosperity) [project](#), linking Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through Armenia under U.S. security guarantees, could cause a significant realignment of transit and energy routes in the South Caucasus. By breaking Moscow's stranglehold on logistics and moving past the endless "corridor" debates, Washington has stepped in as the key architect of a new regional framework that ties the Caucasus directly to Europe. This intervention extends beyond infrastructure and suggests that Washington may finally adopt a strategic approach to the South Caucasus.

Georgia's exclusion from these regional projects is not an accident. Despite Russia's setbacks elsewhere, its influence has resurged in Tbilisi, making Georgia a stark regional exception.

Georgia's exclusion from these regional projects is not an accident. Despite Russia's setbacks elsewhere, its influence has resurged in Tbilisi, making Georgia a stark regional exception. Under the Georgian Dream's rule, Moscow has regained leverage through [creeping authoritarianism](#), state capture, and the strategic use of disinformation that [paints](#) Euro-Atlantic integration as a threat. This foreign policy reversal is a reflection of Georgia's deteriorating credibility as a reliable partner for the West. By choosing passivity at home and equivocation abroad, the ruling party has allowed Russia to reinsert itself into Tbilisi's decision-making—ensuring that, at the very moment the region is breaking free from Moscow's shadow, Georgia is paradoxically sinking deeper into it.

Georgia's Internal Context: A Legitimacy Crisis

The central question for Georgia in the context of ongoing geopolitical realignments remains: why is securing a place in the Western world not just a strategic goal but a matter of survival for Georgia?

The answer to this not-so-simple question has always been clear: the post-Cold War international order, built on rules and institutions designed to safeguard state sovereignty and democracy, is the only obstacle that could (not necessarily will, but could) prevent Russia from realizing its [declared](#) aim of reestablishing exclusive spheres of influence, starting with Georgia. If Georgia turns its back on the guarantors of international law and the West's protective frameworks, the durability of its sovereignty stands on perilously shaky ground – Moscow's goodwill. Rejecting the West means exclusion from the civilized world with all of the bitter consequences: exposed defense and security system, opaque investments, technological stagnation, exclusion from quality education, and economic hardship resembling that of Belarus or Venezuela. In places where rules break down, survival demands either overwhelming strength or powerful allies; Georgia's current policy undermines both.

Paradoxically, Georgia has [become](#) Russia's sphere of exclusive influence, importing many elements of Moscow's governance model. Power has concentrated overwhelmingly in the hands of one man, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who effectively controls the state's apparatus and decision-making. The ruling party openly [vowed](#) before elections to crush civil society and opposition and that pledge is now being ruthlessly [fulfilled](#). The government speaks only to its voters while branding dissenters as traitors, threatening them openly, and responding to months of sustained protests with rapid-fire repressive legislation, heavy fines, and arrests without credible evidence. Politicized police, operating with anonymity and impunity, indiscriminately detain citizens, subjecting many to verbal and physical abuse.

The judiciary barely functions independently, approving almost all of the prosecution demands mainly based on the executives' will, condemning hundreds of students, activists, and political lead-

ers. Nearly all politically sensitive court cases favor the state, incarcerating dozens of politicians and civil society representatives. This pattern unmistakably mirrors a Russian-style authoritarianism where law serves as a tool to preserve power rather than justice – rule by law instead of the rule of law.

What differentiates Georgia from other Russian-style authoritarian systems, however, is the widespread popular resistance. The majority of its citizens reject this regime's capitulation to Russia and continue fighting for a European future.

What differentiates Georgia from other Russian-style authoritarian systems, however, is the widespread popular resistance. The majority of its citizens reject this regime's capitulation to Russia and continue fighting for a European future. This legitimacy crisis is central: the Georgian Dream's problem is not simply electoral [fraud](#); it is their brazen betrayal of constitutionally enshrined national interests and the will of the majority. By employing authoritarian tactics to confuse the population and selling capitulation to Russia as pragmatism, the government cheats on the social contract. It uses the fog of war and global uncertainty around Ukraine to terrify citizens with war [narratives](#) and make decisions that subjugate Georgia to Moscow behind the public's back.

The high polarization of Georgian society is a direct product of the Georgian Dream's propaganda machine, modeled after standard authoritarian playbooks that sow confusion, weaken coherent resistance, and disorient citizens. Media fragmentation and political manipulation serve to paralyze collective action and obscure the fundamental choices confronting the nation.

The critical cleavage lies not in rival personali-

ties or parties but in whether Georgia, as a nation, chooses survival through alignment with the West, grounded in shared values and national interests, or allows itself to be pulled back into Russia's orbit, thus choosing survival of the regime over the survival of the nation. This is the clearest and starkest choice facing the country, which should be underpinning all political debates. Instead, aiming at a divided society that is easier to rule, the Georgian Dream deliberately blurs this fundamental choice and tries to replace it with various false dilemmas.

The Georgian ruling regime's legitimacy deficit has created a dangerous vacuum. If Georgia continues down this path, it will risk not only failing to seize the historic opportunity offered by a weakened Russia and an engaged West, but also losing its sovereignty.

The Georgian ruling regime's legitimacy deficit has created a dangerous vacuum. If Georgia continues down this path, it will risk not only failing to seize the historic opportunity offered by a weakened Russia and an engaged West, but also losing its sovereignty. Just as during Soviet occupation, when Georgians united around independence despite repression, today's struggle for freedom demands unity against authoritarian complacency and external domination.

A False Dilemma: Engaging with Georgia, Not Its Regime

Against the backdrop of realigning geopolitical vectors and changing power symmetries in the South Caucasus and Europe, several fundamental questions arise: Is Georgia slipping beyond the Western radar a logical consequence of broader shifts or merely a reflection of its diminishing strategic importance? Could it be part of a larger great-power bargain or is Georgia simply too

small to warrant attention? Few could have imagined that Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan would meet the U.S. president in Washington to discuss American interests in the Caucasus while Georgia, once the only true strategic partner in the region, was conspicuously sidelined. It is in this uncertain context that Georgia's future is quietly being determined.

Yet, some in the West still maintain the illusion that the Georgian Dream can return to a pro-Western path. This is a misplaced [illusion](#) and a very dangerous one, too. The European Union has continuously urged the ruling party to undertake democratic reforms and so has the United States. These calls show that some bureaucrats and indecisive politicians in the West still entertain ungrounded hope that the Georgian Dream can reverse the course, undo the repressive legislation, and bring back the all-but-dead political process. Such an approach also risks abandoning the Georgian people who continue to resist authoritarian backsliding.

At this point of escalation, The West's primary objective must be to prevent Russia from taking over Georgia. This goal is achievable through a proper policy and an effective strategy that still remains to be developed. Instead, a dangerous false dilemma has been creeping into policy circles in Brussels and Washington: Does Georgia need to be democratic to be a reliable ally? After all, there are a number of non-democratic states that are allies or, if not allies, then on good terms with the West.

Such a dilemma is the biggest gift for the Georgian Dream. They, together with the lobbyists, have been promoting transactional engagement with the West, irrelevantly comparing Georgia to countries like Azerbaijan, Central Asian states, or Gulf monarchies. This reasoning, at its core, reflects Russian hybrid tactics - an insidious "kill chain" strategy designed to impose a new status quo which no one dares to challenge. The new

strategic narrative, 'The Georgian Dream is here whether you like it or not and we will stay,' now demands acceptance of a Kremlin-aligned reality. The recent [letter](#) of the Georgian Dream President Mikheil Kavelashvili to President Trump is a testament to such an approach. "Let us reset the relations and start from a clean slate" - is a main message to Washington and, by extension, Brussels.

The West must recognize that an undemocratic Georgia will inevitably sink deeper into Russia's orbit, eliminating any true possibility of being a reliable partner to the West. The hybrid war Georgia faces is binary: it is either democratic and pro-Western or autocratic and beholden to Moscow. There is no middle ground.

But the West must recognize that an undemocratic Georgia will inevitably sink deeper into Russia's orbit, eliminating any true possibility of being a reliable partner to the West. The hybrid war Georgia faces is binary: it is either democratic and pro-Western or autocratic and beholden to Moscow. There is no middle ground. If the ruling power depends on Kremlin approval, there can be no truly transactional ties with the U.S. or Europe. Russian interests aim precisely to squeeze Western influence out of the region.

Democratic Resistance is the Best Bet for Georgia's Independence

The goal for Georgia's allies must be twofold. It is not enough to condemn the consolidation of authoritarianism, which is already firmly in place, as extensively documented in the previous issues of this journal. Equally important is the recognition that resistance still endures: in the streets, in prisons, and in courtrooms, Georgians continue to fight. At the peak of protests, as many as 300,000

people took to the streets daily. While disjointed and inconsistent policies from political forces and international partners have since contributed to a gradual decline in active public demonstrations, the number of those dissatisfied with the Georgian Dream's governance and aware of the country's grim trajectory continues to grow.

Due to the growing repressions and violence, the mood and spirit are noticeably depressing even in the ranks of the traditional supporters of the Georgian Dream. This dynamic is the very foundation of the Georgian Dream's legitimacy crisis and undeniable proof that the regime has crossed a point of no return: it can no longer effectively govern the country without using force and the more it relies on repression and force to cling to power, the sooner its hold will collapse.

The resistance movement deserves unequivocal backing because it embodies the hopes for sovereignty and freedom that the current regime undermines.

Consequently, it is imperative that a clear coherent strategy exists both inside Georgia and internationally, with a vision on how to support those who legitimately, lawfully, and justly fight for the country's fundamental interests. There can be no compromise on defending Georgia from being surrendered to Russia's control. The resistance movement deserves unequivocal backing because it embodies the hopes for sovereignty and freedom that the current regime undermines.

The future of Georgia hinges on the combination of the continued courage of its people and the steadfast commitment of its allies to stand with them, not with the authoritarian status quo. Only this path offers a chance for the free Western world to restore its leverage in Georgia and the wider region, not resuming talks with the regime that misplaced the agency of representing the interests of society and lost the ability to resist pressure from the Kremlin ■

Saving Georgia's Democracy Helps Contain Russia

The sources of the ongoing Georgian political crisis are both domestic and international. It is the product of an incomplete process of democratization, carried out under arguably [inadequate Western tutelage](#). This process failed to deliver resilient institutions capable of withstanding populist authoritarian challenges, yet it created a sufficiently widespread popular demand for democratic governance to spark civil resistance. At the same time, the Georgian crisis is also a byproduct of shifting international circumstances. It is both a symptom and a result of the ongoing unravelling of the rules-based international order under pressure from revisionist powers such as Russia. A corollary of this is the local version of the global culture wars: a politically engineered struggle between traditional conservatism, presented as part of national identity, and progressive liberalism, portrayed as an external imposition.

Georgia's dramatic turn towards authoritarianism should be seen as part and parcel of the current international context, defined by power-political competition between global authoritarian powers and the West.

While the current issue has examined domestic aspects of the Georgian crisis, this article focuses on its international dimension. It argues that Georgia's dramatic turn towards authoritarianism should be seen as part and parcel of the current international context, defined by power-political competition between global authoritarian powers and the West. Consequently, it should be addressed in those terms—as a front in Russia's revisionist campaign, carried out by opportunistic local proxies, with direct consequences for the future of European security.



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The long-held assumptions about the resilience of Western democracies as global standard-setters—and the unquestioned superiority of democracy over other systems of governance—can no longer be taken for granted. The liberal international order that once facilitated the diffusion of democratic norms is giving way to a fragmented, multipolar, post-Cold War landscape—one more tolerant of authoritarianism and less inclined to scrutinize domestic abuses. This has enabled Georgia's ruling elite to make choices and pursue policies that previously would have been too costly, both politically and materially.

In such an environment, strategies for defending democracy should be viewed as part of the security agenda and must be recalibrated to remain effective amid these harsher global realities. Domestic actors resisting Russian-style authoritarianism need to move beyond the post-Cold War paradigm and lower their expectations of external support. Western actors, in turn, should make Georgia part of their Russia containment policy and revise their current “wait and see” stance, taking advantage of domestic sources of resistance and resilience before they are harmed beyond repair.

Local Drivers of Global Authoritarianism

Georgia [has taken](#) a dramatic turn toward authoritarianism. As this issue goes to press, seven leading civil society organizations have had their bank [accounts frozen](#) and a [growing number](#) of democracy activists languish in prison. The ruling Georgian Dream party is compensating for its crisis of legitimacy by putting opponents on trial, rewriting recent history, punishing dissent, and engaging in witch-hunts and character assassinations. Paradoxically, however, in their betrayal, Georgia's rulers may also have sown the seeds of renewal. Their power grab has provoked not only the most sustained collective resistance from a broad seg-

ment of Georgian society but also the emergence of a new kind of national hero.

Georgia's new generation of democracy warriors is not made up of soldiers on the battlefield or revolutionaries with manifestos; they are ordinary women and men who chose defiance over silence and sacrifice over submission.

Georgia's new generation of democracy [warriors](#) is not made up of soldiers on the battlefield or revolutionaries with manifestos; they are ordinary women and men who chose defiance over silence and sacrifice over submission. They are driven not by ideology or political ambition but by the love of their country, the value of democracy, and the belief in freedom as a greater common good. They walk into prison cells undefeated, their dignity intact, and in doing so, they are giving a verdict of history to Georgia's ruling regime.

I have often argued that one of the reasons behind Georgia's incomplete democratic transition, which left the country oscillating between democratic breakthroughs and authoritarian retrenchment, is that we never had our own Václav Havel. We never had a leader who would build solid foundations of democracy and leave them intact without clinging to power or bending the system to their will. The lack of homegrown traditions of democracy has led many commentators to [conclude](#) that democracy was never truly internalized in Georgia. While this may be true at the level of political elites, the resistance unfolding in the country's streets has shown that at the societal level, Georgia's democracy is more [resilient](#) than often acknowledged. Thanks to [heroes](#) like jailed journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli, poet Zviad Ratiani, actor Andro Chichinadze, and many more who emerged from a popular, diffuse, and non-hierarchical resistance movement, Georgia can claim ownership of democracy. No one can

say that it is alien to our soil or a gift imposed from abroad.

At the same time, Georgian democracy is confronting its most formidable challenge yet. Whereas democratic forces once relied on external backing, today it is the local autocrats who enjoy international support from like-minded regimes, armed with populist ideology and a well-rehearsed playbook of modern neo-authoritarianism. Under these circumstances, it is tempting to downplay the role of local agency—but that would be a mistake. Just as the sources of Georgia's democratic resistance are largely local, so too is its autocratic adversary.

There is no doubt that Russia benefits from the policies pursued by the Georgian Dream and actively encourages them. But placing too much emphasis on Moscow's role not only absolves Georgia's rulers of responsibility—a burden that is theirs to bear—it also misplaces the target of the struggle. Outsourcing agency to an external actor, however powerful and malign, makes it harder to defeat. It is both easier and more expedient to confront the Georgian Dream in order to contain Russia than the other way around.

External constraints often shape domestic policy choices, particularly in smaller and less powerful states. Georgia is no exception. Its rulers frequently insist that their overriding priority is the preservation of peace and stability amid mounting security threats and geopolitical volatility. Yet, it is far from clear how dismantling democratic institutions and consolidating power serve that purpose. How does purging the civil service of qualified professionals strengthen stability? How does concentrating decision-making in the hands of a narrow circle of loyalists—and ultimately one unaccountable ruler—equip Georgia to navigate a turbulent regional environment? The ruling party bears responsibility for the choices it has made and it must be held accountable for the consequences.

Even if Russia applied pressure, Georgia's rulers had options. They could have followed [the Serbian model](#): preserving a hybrid system, keeping channels open with the EU and Western partners, while maintaining cordial relations with Russia and expanding ties with non-Western actors such as China. At first, they drew inspiration from [the Hungarian model](#) and could have remained within its bounds. Instead, they went far beyond it—jailing opponents, manipulating elections, and teetering on the verge of becoming a fully blown autocracy. It was the Georgian Dream that chose to go as far as it did, placing Georgia squarely in the anti-Western camp and [using](#) popular fear of war as a convenient cover and a propaganda instrument.

Meanwhile, other states in the region have [sought to capitalize](#) on Russia's distraction with Ukraine by diversifying their partnerships, aiming to reduce dependence on Moscow. For the first time, Armenia and Azerbaijan are not aligning with Russia against one another but are instead pursuing their interests independently—and often in defiance of Russian preferences. A potential [U.S. role](#) in managing the so-called Zangezur corridor, along with the prospect of normalized relations between Armenia and Türkiye, would further erode Russia's influence. In Central Asia, too, states are emerging as increasingly autonomous actors, fostering levels of intra-regional cooperation that have hitherto not been seen. Collectively, these shifts weaken Moscow's ability to manipulate local conflicts as tools of pressure and power projection.

Georgia bucks this trend. Rather than seizing the moment to deepen its European integration and seek stronger security guarantees from Western partners, the ruling elite has chosen to edge closer to Russia, mimicking Russian propaganda that depicts Europe as a source of evil, liberal decadence, and the threat of war. Their goal, aligned with Russia's strategic objectives, is not only to weaken support for European integration among Georgians but also to undermine their sense of

belonging to Europe and their self-identification as Europeans. As a result, Georgia has lost its traditional Western partners and allies without gaining new ones, making it an easy target of Russia's expansionist ambitions. Instead of diversifying its foreign policy and strengthening Georgia's regional and international standing, the government has all but [abandoned](#) foreign policy altogether. This outcome stems from deliberate policy choices, not from geopolitical inevitability. Yet, those choices were made possible by a shifting international environment—one that enabled Georgia's turn toward anti-Western authoritarianism at relatively little cost.

Georgia as a Symptom of a Multipolar Global Order

The changing international environment has enabled Georgia's autocratic drift, exposing the limits of Western—especially European—leverage over neo-authoritarian regimes such as the Georgian Dream in the context of emerging multipolarity. Georgia's case is symptomatic of a fracturing global order, defined by intensifying competition among rival centers of power and the replacement of value-based multilateralism with transactional bilateralism. While the exact contours of this reordering are not yet clear, several features can already be identified. The Georgian Dream proved itself to be well-adapted at exploiting these features in order to strengthen its hand and push back against popular resistance.

The first is the rise of global authoritarian powers, notably Russia and China, which have long sought to challenge the liberal international order established under U.S. hegemony. What unites them is the ambition to reshape that order in ways that serve their interests: privileging non-intervention in domestic affairs, redefining sovereignty as an absolute right rather than a responsibility, and asserting claims to spheres of influence. In their

vision, major states carve out regional hegemonies and international stability rests not on universal norms but on a balance of power and mutual recognition of strategic interests.

A growing number of states now view the Chinese model of authoritarian development as an increasingly attractive alternative to Western liberal democracy.

While this may resemble a reprise of the 19th-century Concert of Europe, one significant difference stands out: the rise of so-called middle powers, increasingly assertive and determined to safeguard “strategic autonomy” in both domestic and foreign policy. States such as India, Türkiye, Brazil, and Indonesia, among others, are not interested in taking sides or forming value-based alignments. They, too, favor transactional, interest-driven policies designed to maximize benefits in a context of multipolar competition. They, too, seek to limit external scrutiny of their domestic affairs and show little concern for universal human rights or governance models abroad. The consequence is not a strengthening of democratic norms but the normalization of autocratic deviations. Moreover, a growing number of states now view the Chinese model of authoritarian development as an increasingly attractive alternative to Western liberal democracy.

The second and most consequential characteristic of the current international environment is the shift in U.S. posture under the second Trump administration. The greatest challenge to the liberal international order now comes from the very country that created it. Trump has argued that the system built by and for the United States has ultimately undermined American interests, drained resources, and distracted Washington from the arenas of most critical competition. His administration, too, has [embraced](#) multipolarity—seeing in it a way to scale back U.S. global commitments,

consolidate power, and position America more effectively for strategic rivalry. As Julian Gewirtz [observed](#) in *Foreign Affairs*, the result is that ‘key U.S. partners are less aligned with Washington, autocracy faces less pushback, and China—along with its strategic partner Russia—has far greater freedom of action and global influence.’

One of the Trump administration’s earliest moves was the wholesale [closure](#) of USAID missions and a sharp reduction in U.S. democracy promotion programs worldwide, including those backed by the National Endowment for Democracy. This decision signaled—and accelerated—what appears to be the third defining feature of the new era: the decline of international NGOs. Rising in the aftermath of the Cold War, these organizations expanded globally, promoting human rights and democracy with generous backing from Western governments and philanthropies. As their influence grew, they faced legitimate criticism for at times resembling businesses—profit-generating machines not entirely free from corruption or partisan bias. Yet, for all their flaws, they achieved a great deal of good.

The very existence of Georgia’s vibrant civil society—acting as a thorn in the side of the authoritarian state and exerting pressure for democratization—is itself the product of years of external democracy support, which became steadily internalized.

The very existence of Georgia’s vibrant civil society—acting as a thorn in the side of the authoritarian state and exerting pressure for democratization—is itself the product of years of external democracy support, which became steadily internalized. Unsurprisingly, many governments have pushed back, viewing both domestic and international civil society organizations as threats to regime stability and control. Georgia’s “foreign agents” law is only one example of a much broad-

er trend. As Sarah Bush and Jennifer Hadden [note](#), more than 130 countries have adopted restrictions on international and foreign-funded NGOs. With the loss of U.S. backing, civil society organizations face mounting pressure and, in many non-democracies, the prospect of disappearing altogether.

For regimes like the Georgian Dream, this shift is a gift from heaven. It vindicates their disdain for civil society and insulates them from external pressure. Ruling party officials [openly celebrated](#) the closure of USAID, branding it an agent of the “Deep State” in a bid to court the Trump administration and secure U.S. backing for their policies. The spread of conspiratorial political discourse—demonizing opponents and deepening social polarization—has long become a defining feature of Georgia’s political life, echoing global trends. The “Deep State” narrative has replaced earlier theories of a [“Global War Party”](#) and now dominates the Georgian Dream’s rhetoric. Anyone who dissents—from local democracy activists to European officials and diplomats—is smeared as an agent of the “Deep State,” allegedly plotting to drag Georgia into war with Russia and impose “woke” ideology on traditional Georgian society. The irony, of course, is that there is no “Deep State” in Georgia apart from the Georgian Dream with its shadow governance and [captured state](#). No military, no bureaucracy, no institutions stand independent of the ruling party’s control. And if there is one political force that has made Georgia more vulnerable to Russia’s aggression, it is the Georgian Dream itself.

Containing Russia by Saving Georgian Democracy

As the post-Cold War order unravels, the old certainties are disappearing with it. Established democracies no longer appear immune to the pressures of populist authoritarianism, while extreme polarization has become a national security chal-

lenge both east and west. Today, the staunchest defenders of democracy are found in places like Georgia and Serbia, where the simple boons of democratic life could never be taken for granted. At the same time, Russia's strategic ambitions have pushed well beyond its so-called "near abroad," reaching into the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa. The war in Ukraine is only the most visible, conventional theatre of Russia's wider global campaign of subversion and disruption—and its principal target is Europe.

The Georgian case demonstrates, however, that the two are inseparable. Saving Georgia's democracy is the best way to push back against Russia's regional interests and disruptive global ambitions.

As the old belief in transforming Russia through trade and political engagement wanes, a new approach is urgently needed to defend Europe and its neighborhood. There is a risk, however, that the long-overdue emphasis on security and defense will come at the expense of democracy and human rights. The Georgian case demonstrates, however, that the two are inseparable. Saving Georgia's democracy is the best way to push back against Russia's regional interests and disruptive global ambitions.

Georgia's slide into an anti-Western authoritarian state would be Russia's gain, a tool to be weaponized in its future confrontations with Europe.

Emmanuel Macron has [described](#) Russia as a predator at Europe's door—an "ogre" that devours its neighbors in order to sustain itself and has no interest in peace. After years of engagement and accommodation, Europe has finally recognized Russia as a threat that must be contained. This requires Western allies to devise a new policy of containment, deciding not only how but also where Russia must be denied the ability to endanger Europe. Ukraine is the obvious priority. Less obvious, but no less essential, is saving Georgia's democracy. The fight is ultimately for Georgians to win, yet it is becoming an increasingly lonely battle. Crusading for human rights may belong to a bygone era, but reducing threats on Europe's doorstep remains urgent. Georgia's slide into an anti-Western authoritarian state would be Russia's gain, a tool to be weaponized in its future confrontations with Europe. Conversely, preserving Georgia's democracy should be recognized as a vital pillar of any credible Russia containment strategy.

However, if Western allies, weary of Georgia's perpetual crisis, convince themselves the country is already a lost cause, they will hand Georgian Dream its greatest prize yet. This resignation, the infamous "Georgia Fatigue," would become the next big meal for the ruling party, like the insatiable Snake on an old Nokia screen, fattening itself on every morsel of Western indifference ■

Demise of a Foreign Policy Paradigm

Rethinking Georgia's Role and Function

There is a classic passage in the landmark Georgian novel, *Data Tutashkhia*, written during Soviet times, which captures a timeless truth: *a nation cannot sustain a state without a clear international role or historic mission*. Georgia once embodied such a function—as the eastern stronghold of Christianity, a buffer against northern tribes, and a vital East-West trade route. This mission shaped both the state and its people: war, sacrifice, and loyalty to the state became the moral framework of national life.

When these functions disappeared, Byzantium collapsed, Russia assumed leadership of Orthodoxy, and global trade shifted to the seas—Georgia lost its purpose and (in)voluntarily became absorbed by Russia. Without a mission, the state weakened, morality eroded, and the people turned from nation-building to mere survival. The result was disunity, fatigue, and decline, ultimately culminating in the loss of statehood.

This historical reflection poignantly highlights the enduring challenge of Georgian statehood and resonates with its foreign policy vision after the restoration of independence. The idea of a nation's international function remains central—a foundational question for Georgia's modern foreign policy community as it seeks once again to define its role in the world.

Since achieving independence in 1991, Georgia has consistently worked to transform its geographic vulnerabilities into strategic strengths. Positioned at the intersection of Europe and Asia, the nation adopted the transport corridor paradigm—an approach that placed Georgia as a central link in Eurasian connectivity. Over time, this paradigm not only shaped the country's foreign policy but also became a defining element of its international identity.

Georgia's approach to regional connectivity was realized through the development of pipelines,



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railways, highways, and ports. This was more than an economic project—it was statecraft and part of an ideology. Each new corridor bypassing Russia was a political act aimed at safeguarding Georgia's sovereignty and integrating it into Western markets. The expansion of these routes reduced reliance on Moscow, drew in Western companies and governments, and offered security rooted not in hard power but in interdependence and shared interest.

Georgia's approach to regional connectivity was realized through the development of pipelines, railways, highways, and ports. This was more than an economic project—it was statecraft and part of an ideology.

For over a decade, this paradigm had been effective.

During the era of Pax Americana, Georgia's role as a corridor state fit neatly into the global order. The Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC), the South Caucasian Gas Pipeline (SCP), the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway (BTK), East-West highways, port projects—each reinforced Georgia's image as an indispensable connector, a place where Eurasian energy and trade converged. The Middle Corridor narrative made Georgia central to discussions of China-Europe connectivity, and even the Digital Silk Road passed through Tbilisi. Georgia even tried to reinvent itself as a logistical hub for East-West trade – cutting red tape and making regulatory changes which attracted investors interested in regional connectivity.

But Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 marked

the end of innocence. It revealed that connectivity and pipelines could not shield Georgia from military aggression and it exposed the fragility of a paradigm built entirely on transit, trade, and connectivity. The subsequent rise of revisionist powers—Russia, China, Iran, Türkiye—accelerated this shift. Each began carving out its own geopolitical projects, contesting the order that had once anchored Georgia.

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Recent wars have driven the point home. Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Middle East—all have redrawn maps and rewritten assumptions. The South Caucasus, once frozen in stalemate, has been jolted into motion. Armenia's dramatic [pivot away](#) from Russia, Azerbaijan's consolidation of military and diplomatic victories and strained relations with Moscow, Türkiye's growing assertiveness, Europe's long-standing interest in diversifying energy supply, and the United States' sudden re-entry into the region have created the conditions for new corridors that bypass Georgia altogether.

At the center of this upheaval is the [proposed link](#) (a Zangezur, or a Syunik corridor, or route) between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan through Armenia—an idea once unthinkable, now edging closer to reality. Backed by Washington and Ankara, and welcomed by a Yerevan desperate to break free from Moscow's grip, this route would establish a direct chain from the Caspian to the Mediterranean, cutting Georgia out of the picture. For three decades, Tbilisi had enjoyed the privilege of indispensability. That privilege is now in question.

A “Eurasian Nokia” – Connecting People

Georgia's corridor paradigm has always been about far more than steel and concrete. TRACECA, [launched](#) at the Brussels ministerial in 1993, was an explicitly Europe-backed effort to pull the South Caucasus—Georgia included—into a rules-based connectivity space linking the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The early pipelines made that vision tangible: the Baku-Supsa pipeline, inaugurated in 1999, created a westward oil outlet via Georgia's Black Sea coast, followed by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (2006) and the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline, which together hard-wired Georgia into East-West energy flows that bypass Russia. Washington codified the political logic behind those choices in the 2009 U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter, [committing](#) to “develop a new Southern Corridor to help Georgia and the rest of Europe diversify their supplies of natural gas.”

Crucially, this corridor idea sits inside Georgia's own national doctrine. The National Security Concept [lists](#) “strengthening the transit role of Georgia” as a core national interest and makes “diversification of energy sources and transportation routes” an explicit energy-security priority. When the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway opened, Tbilisi framed it in exactly those terms—“great importance for the development of the transit function” for Georgia, underscoring that rail was part of statecraft, not just freight. And the intended maritime keystone of the model—the deep-sea port at Anaklia [is](#) (or rather [was](#)) supposed to host larger vessels and lock the Black Sea into global shipping rotations.

In 2019, the EU further embedded Georgia's connectivity role by extending the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) to the Eastern Partnership and [issuing](#) an Indicative Investment

Action Plan that identifies priority cross-border projects; for Georgia alone, that list includes 18 projects worth roughly EUR 3.4 billion across roads, rail, and ports. Brussels has kept adding money and technical help—most recently via the Economic & Investment Plan and targeted upgrades on Georgia's East–West Highway—to speed up compliance with EU standards and cut travel times on the Black Sea corridor. However, this interest from Brussels all but disappeared once the authoritarian rise in Georgia occurred, starting in 2022.

For many years, this strategy thrived because Georgia faced no real competition. It was the dependable hinge in a volatile neighborhood—the connector through which goods, energy, and ideas flowed. But just as Nokia once dominated global telecommunications only to fade when competitors caught up, Georgia now risks the same fate. Its brand as the indispensable corridor will only endure if it adapts and reinvents itself as new routes emerge and larger players enter the game.

An Alternative to the Alternative

The Zangezur Corridor, traversing Armenia's Syunik province, has become the lightning rod of the new connectivity discussions in the South Caucasus. Born from the 2020 war's ceasefire and fueled by the shifting alliances of the past five years, it has drawn in every major actor in the region, each attaching its own narrative and ambitions.

For Azerbaijan, it is more than a road: it is the embodiment of victory, sealing the gains of war by giving Baku direct access to Nakhchivan without reliance on Iran. It cements Azerbaijan's status as a transit hub linking the Caspian to Türkiye and beyond while deepening its strategic partnership with Ankara. Moreover, when the route is opened, Azerbaijan will also control the South–North trade

from Iran to Russia, provided that sanctions on these two states are lifted and their participation in strategic connectivity projects is feasible.

For Türkiye, the corridor is a bridge to the Turkic world—a material realization of pan-Turkic ambition. It would allow Ankara to extend its influence further eastward, binding Central Asia more closely to Türkiye through Azerbaijan. Economically, it unlocks new routes; politically, it confirms Türkiye as the indispensable power of the South Caucasus.

For Armenia, the picture is more complex. Yerevan's Crossroads of Peace initiative reframed connectivity not as defeat but as an opportunity, with a heavy emphasis on opening all kinds of transit and trade routes, even beyond Syunik. By reopening links with Türkiye and Azerbaijan and strengthening existing ones with Iran and Georgia, Armenia hopes to shed its isolation and diminish its dependence on Russia. It is a gamble, although turning the corridor from a symbol of subjugation into an instrument of national revival is not an easy task and is prone to making potent enemies, mainly in Moscow.

With American companies leasing the Armenian stretch for a century, Washington would gain both economic presence and strategic leverage, controlling a trade artery in the backyard of Iran, Russia, and China.

For the United States, a rebranded Zangezur corridor into a trade route – TRIPP (the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity) adds a significant layer. With American companies leasing the Armenian stretch for a century, Washington would gain both economic presence and strategic leverage, controlling a trade artery in the backyard of Iran, Russia, and China. What began as an abstract geopolitical idea now carries the promise of

tangible U.S. power projection. As long as President Trump and, by extension, Washington maintain interest in this project, the success chance of this route and peace in the region will be high.

For Iran, the project is an existential problem; however, Tehran's influence in the current circumstances is quite limited. Its role as Azerbaijan's bridge to Nakhchivan would evaporate, stripping Tehran of significant leverage over a neighbor that has not been easy in the last decade. Worse, the corridor would anchor a Turkish-Azerbaijani-Western axis along its northern border, raising fears of encirclement and weakening its influence in the Caucasus.

For Russia, the implications are almost entirely negative. The corridor sidelines Moscow as a peace guarantor, weakens its grip on Armenia, removes Russian physical presence from Armenian borders, and deepens Türkiye's role at Russia's expense. In a region once defined by Moscow's dominance, Russia risks becoming a spectator, watching as others redraw the map without it.

Every actor has a vision for the corridor. Every actor sees a gain. Every actor is shaping the future. And Georgia—once the indispensable link—is nowhere to be found.

In this swirl of shifting interests, one fact stands out: every actor has a vision for the corridor. Every actor sees a gain. Every actor is shaping the future. And Georgia—once the indispensable link—is nowhere to be found.

Back to the Drawing Board?

Historically, Georgia thrived when it had a function. As a crossroads on the Silk Road, it mattered because it connected worlds. As a corridor in the

1990s and 2000s, it mattered because it connected energy and trade to the West. But if the Zangezur/TRIPP route materializes, Georgia risks being stripped of that function. Its hard-earned status as an alternative corridor would be undermined; its leverage as the indispensable gateway eroded.

The danger is not just lost revenues or stalled infrastructure. It is strategic irrelevance. Without a role, Georgia risks once again becoming a nation of survival rather than a nation with a mission. And as it is elegantly noted in *Data Tutashkhia*, once Georgia loses mission, it also loses sovereignty, independence, and statehood.

The tragedy is that this increased attention to regional connectivity in the South Caucasus comes at a time when Georgia's leadership has turned away from its Western partners, alienating allies and drifting into Moscow's shadow. Under Bidzina Ivanishvili, the state is losing not just friends but purpose. If Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye succeed in building a new regional order, Georgia may wake up to find itself excluded from the future of the region it once anchored.

The lesson from *Data Tutashkhia* remains: *a nation without a role cannot sustain a state*. For Georgia, the choice is simple. Either it reclaims a mission—anchored in Euro-Atlantic integration and renewed Western partnerships—or it resigns itself to decline, watching others write the story of Eurasian connectivity while it slips into an irrelevant cul-de-sac ■

Friends with All, Captive to None

Baku's 360 Degree Diplomacy and Sovereign Leverage

Can you think of a head of state who is simultaneously Israel's [closest partner](#) in his region and able to [converse directly](#) with Iran's president without interpreters? A leader who was [warmly received](#) by Donald Trump in the Oval Office and, only three weeks later, [honored](#) with a full ceremony in Beijing during the World War II commemoration? This same country positions itself as an active voice of the Global South, has recently chaired the Non-Aligned Movement, and counts the European Union as its largest trading partner. It is a Shiite-majority state that maintains fraternal ties with Sunni Türkiye, [works closely](#) with the Gulf monarchies and [Pakistan](#), and—unlike any other Eastern Partnership country—hosts no Russian troops on its soil, legally or illegally. Most recently, it restored full territorial integrity, undoing the losses suffered 26 years earlier in a time of weakness and turmoil. The country is Azerbaijan and

the leader is Ilham Aliyev, whose geopolitical maneuvering commands respect even among critics of his domestic rule.

In an era defined by the triumph of radical transactionalism in diplomacy, with two historically unfriendly powers—Russia and Iran—in decline (the first mired in its war of conquest in Ukraine; the second weakened by its confrontation with Israel, internal unrest, and loss of regional proxies), and an American administration under Donald Trump, who disdains spreading democracy and elevates force as the supreme tool of foreign policy, the stars are perfectly aligned for Azerbaijan to seize the upper hand.

From Collapse to Comeback

Yet, Azerbaijan started from a low point. In the 1990s, it suffered a harrowing defeat in the First



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Nagorno-Karabakh War against Armenia—backed then by Russia—and lost control of nearly 20% of its internationally recognized territory. The [territorial loss](#) triggered the displacement of almost 700,000 refugees and internally displaced persons—almost 10% of its population—who required urgent humanitarian aid. The constrained 1994 [Bishkek Peace Treaty](#) was harsh on Azerbaijan but afforded it breathing space without formally recognizing the territorial loss or Armenian control over Nagorno-Karabakh.

At that time, Azerbaijan was also under a U.S. arms [embargo](#)—pushed through by lobbyists from the Armenian diaspora in Congress—and plagued by corruption and clan-based governance that hindered economic development. Yet, battered but not extinguished, Azerbaijan began to recover, banking on two initial strengths: its vast hydrocarbon reserves and its ethno-cultural proximity to Türkiye (although not as deeply historic as often thought).

Under President Heydar Aliyev—a former Soviet intelligence officer and Politburo member—Azerbaijan built a firm [alliance](#) with Türkiye (“One Nation, Two States”), including military cooperation, and began exporting its oil and gas directly to Western markets with Western partners, deliberately bypassing the Russians. Refusing to let Moscow control its resource wealth—a bold move in the region at the time—became the cornerstone of Azerbaijan’s regained sovereignty and independence. Today, that foundational strategy has borne remarkable geopolitical fruit.

The “contracts of the century” with Western energy companies and U.S. security assurances for pipelines circumventing Russia in the 1990s placed Azerbaijan and, crucially, transit-reliant Georgia, firmly on the global geopolitical map. The growing U.S. interest in the region from the late 1990s through the 2000s helped preserve Azerbaijan’s

autonomy while allowing it to maintain delicate ties with two challenging neighbors: Russia and Iran. Both pressured Baku—the former through militarized Nagorno-Karabakh, the latter via Shiite solidarity—yet, Azerbaijan kept its footing.

Western engagement proved insufficient to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict—even with near-successful proposals like the [2001 Key West Talks](#) or the 2007 [Madrid Principles](#)—because Russia, a co-chair of the OSCE [Minsk Group](#), had no incentive to see resolution and quietly encouraged intransigence from Armenia. With U.S. interest waning under the Obama administration, Azerbaijan—now wealthier than Armenia—started preparing its defense capabilities for a possible military solution. With renewed military reform, strengthened ties to Türkiye, and technological and intelligence cooperation with Israel, Baku laid the groundwork that would pay off a decade later.

Azerbaijan - Russia: Emancipation from the Evil Stepmother

The situation of today’s extreme tension between Moscow and Baku has deeper roots than the incident of December 2024 when an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger [plane was shot down](#) by the Russian Air Defense, followed by the ruthless killing of two Azerbaijani citizens by Russian law enforcement in Yekaterinburg. These incidents are serious but they are not the cause of the deterioration in relations. Rather, they are symptoms that reveal just how far apart the two countries stand and how differently they see the world.

Russia has never digested its imperial complex. It sees no need to apologize for the downing of a civilian aircraft belonging to what it still perceives as a former province of its empire.

Russia has never digested its imperial complex. It sees no need to apologize for the downing of a civilian aircraft belonging to what it still perceives as a former province of its empire. As in previous cases — [Malaysia Airlines over Ukraine](#) or [Korean Air](#) in the 1980s — there were no apologies, no regrets. Even Iran's Ayatollah regime admitted its mistake when it shot down a Ukrainian passenger plane in Tehran in January 2020 and [paid](#) compensation. According to sources, Russian envoys even asked Azerbaijan to share responsibility with Ukraine, arguing that it was the presence of Ukrainian drones in Russian airspace that had triggered their air-defense systems that downed the Azerbaijani plane.

Baku, however, sees itself as a sovereign power, increasingly confident in recent years, unwilling to bow to anyone. By refusing to blame Ukraine, Azerbaijan defied its former master. Russia then considered this an unfriendly act and refused to apologize to Baku. Azerbaijan's decision to bring the case before international courts further highlights the rift between the two states.

Subsequent Azerbaijani declarations of support for Ukraine's territorial integrity only deepened the rift. Moscow retaliated using its main lever: the large Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia (over 1.5 million people). The killings of Azerbaijani citizens, manhunts in Russian cities, and harassment of long-established businessmen recalled the Kremlin's anti-Georgian campaign in 2006 when Putin punished Tbilisi's pro-Western course.

Azerbaijan responded as Georgia once did: several Russian intelligence officers working under the cover of Sputnik journalists were [arrested](#). Unlike Georgia, however, which expelled them, Azerbaijan is keeping them in custody. These are unmistakable signs: relations are badly damaged and reconciliation will not come easily.

The Roots of the Discontent

As we noted earlier, the conflict's origins run much deeper—what we are witnessing is merely their concrete manifestation. Putin once declared, “Wherever a Russian soldier has set foot, that land is ours.” After the 9 November 2020 ceasefire and the arrival of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Kremlin assumed the territory was effectively theirs. Just as in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1990s, Russia's so-called “peacekeepers” acted more as “piece-keepers,” clinging to imperial fragments. Yet within three years, Azerbaijan—backed by Turkish planning and support—regained full control of Nagorno-Karabakh. For Moscow, the loss of this lever in the Caucasus was nothing short of humiliating.

Türkiye's expanding influence in the South Caucasus—on top of its rivalry with Russia in Syria, Libya, the Black Sea, and the Balkans—only deepened the Kremlin's resentment. At the same time, Baku's firm backing of Ukraine's territorial integrity after 2022 further irked Moscow. Mass rallies in Baku in solidarity with Kyiv, shipments of humanitarian aid, and steady oil supplies all underscored Azerbaijan's alignment with [Ukraine](#). With the Nagorno-Karabakh question resolved, Azerbaijan has gained the confidence to push back against Russian dominance and decades of imperial condescension. Russian commentators bristled when Ilham Aliyev, in a recent *Al Arabiya* [interview](#), bluntly referred to the “1920 Bolshevik invasion” and the ensuing Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan—an episode long downplayed by Baku to avoid confrontation with Moscow. Now, Aliyev is assertive enough to say it openly.

Azerbaijanis have not forgotten Soviet violence — the January 1990 massacre in Baku (Qara Yanvar, “[Black January](#)”) or Russia's involvement in the [Khojaly massacre](#) of 1992. While not instrumental-

ized politically for years, these memories run deep. They explain, for instance, why Baku celebrates Turkish victories in football but not Russia's.

Heydar Aliyev, the father, was the first to seek Western alignment. His senior foreign policy adviser, Vafa Guluzadeh, said as early as 1999 that NATO bases were the only true defense against Russia. Under Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan [closed](#) the Russian Gabala Radar Station in 2012 and [signed](#) the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support with Türkiye (2010), strengthened by the [Shusha Declaration](#) of 2021.

Russia's Limited Leverage on Azerbaijan

Mistrust of Russia has led Baku to keep its land border with Russia closed for more than five years — officially for COVID but in practice due to fear of Russian hybrid tactics. As a result, Russian influence in Azerbaijan is far weaker than in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, or pre-2022 Ukraine.

Moscow's leverage is limited, too. There is no viable pro-Russian party in Azerbaijan and trade volumes remain modest (USD [4.8 billion](#) in 2024 versus Armenia's USD [12 billion](#) with Russia despite its much smaller size). Azerbaijan is immune to energy blackmail as it is itself an energy exporter. Its alliance with Türkiye — NATO's second-largest army — provides strong security guarantees, reinforced by the visible [presence](#) of Turkish F-16s landed on the Ganja airfield during the 2020 war. Russia, bogged down in Ukraine, would risk unrest among its own 20 million Muslims if it moved against Azerbaijan given Baku's friendly ties with the North Caucasus and Volga Turkic-speaking republics.

With Armenia drifting away from Moscow and normalizing with Baku, Russia's only remaining pressure tool is the Azerbaijani diaspora inside

Russia — vulnerable to state harassment. The current crisis edges toward a point of no return as Azerbaijan strengthens its ties with Ukraine more openly than before.

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Trump and Washington: Rediscovery of a Strategic Ally

Donald Trump's return to power marked a significant improvement in U.S.-Azerbaijani relations. During his first presidency, ties were pragmatic, focused on energy and counterterrorism, but not politically deep. The U.S. largely stayed out of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, distracted by its own elections.

In his second term, however, Trump rediscovered Azerbaijan as a valuable ally, especially given its strategic location bordering Iran. Israel largely facilitated this rediscovery, Baku's close security partner, which acted as a bridge to Washington.

Aliyev frequently [criticized](#) the Obama and Biden administrations for pro-Armenian bias and invoked Trump's favorite phrases — “Deep State,” “Washington Swamp,” “Swamp Frogs” — even endorsing the theory of the “stolen” 2020 election. His anger was particularly focused on the reactivation of Section [907 of the Freedom Support Act](#) which restricts U.S. aid to Azerbaijan. Although waived in 2001 and temporarily reinstated under Biden (for U.S. [use](#) of Azerbaijani logistics during the 2021 Kabul evacuation), the waiver was rescinded immediately afterward — something Baku considered unfair and humiliating.

Parallel diplomacy involving Steve Witkoff, Israeli intermediaries, and Trump's family circle paved the way for a spectacular rapprochement, culminating in the [Azerbaijan-Armenia Peace Agreement](#) at the White House. The accord created the TRIPP Corridor (Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity) linking Azerbaijan proper with Nakhchivan via Armenia — a historic breakthrough boosting both U.S. prestige and Azerbaijan's position.

Trump has since openly admired Aliyev who, together with Armenia's Pashinyan, nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Aliyev, a long-ruling strongman who restored territorial integrity, aligned with Washington on key issues, and controls a hydrocarbon-rich state, is seen by Trump as an ideal foreign leader. In return, Trump [issued](#) a waiver on Section 907, a highly symbolic gesture for Baku.

Today, Trump views Azerbaijan as a key ally in the South Caucasus and beyond. Baku is even being considered for inclusion in the Abraham Accords, despite already recognizing Israel. Azerbaijan also seeks to mediate between Central Asian states and Washington, further raising its significance. In exchange, the U.S. supports Azerbaijan as a bridge for energy and trade between Asia and Europe, strengthening European energy security at Russia's expense.

The Balancing Triangle: Türkiye, Israel, and Iran

One of the major challenges of Azerbaijani diplomacy is reconciling what seems irreconcilable: maintaining good relations simultaneously with Türkiye, Iran, and Israel. The hostility between Iran and Israel is well known but Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also has extremely tense relations with Tel Aviv. Traditionally, Türkiye was the Muslim-majority country with the closest ties to Israel but

since the AKP came to power and Ankara sought to reassert itself as the leader of the Muslim world, relations quickly deteriorated. Türkiye has tried to present itself as the champion of the Palestinian cause, which led to several serious clashes with Israel, starting with the Mavi Marmara [incident](#) in 2010 and culminating in the further breakdown of relations following the Hamas terrorist [attack](#) on 7 October 2023, and the ongoing Israeli military operation in Gaza.

Ilham Aliyev once compared Azerbaijani-Israeli relations to an iceberg with nine-tenths hidden beneath the surface. This statement, [revealed](#) by WikiLeaks among thousands of leaked U.S. diplomatic cables, sparked wide debate and criticism in the Islamic world at the time. The discreet and unofficial nature of these ties reflects Azerbaijan's concern for preserving its relationships with Muslim friends and neighbors. Thus, although Baku and Tel Aviv have had diplomatic relations for over 30 years and enjoy close cooperation in defense and intelligence, Azerbaijan only [opened](#) an embassy in Israel in 2023 — and in Tel Aviv, not Jerusalem, again out of consideration for its other partners.

Israel is also a major client for Azerbaijani oil, [supplied](#) via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, accounting for around 40% of Israel's oil imports. For reasons of Islamic solidarity (Azerbaijan is a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, OIC, which provides important backing at the UN), Baku occasionally joins statements criticizing Israel — for example, regarding the [Gaza war](#) or [strikes](#) against Iran. Yet, these declarations do not affect bilateral relations which operate on a deeper level; in fact, they may even be pre-coordinated with Israeli authorities. This practice is not unique to Azerbaijan — oriental diplomacy follows unwritten rules quite different from those in Europe.

A full description of the scope of ties between Tel Aviv and Baku is beyond this article but it is worth

recalling that defense cooperation with Israel is almost as important to Azerbaijan as that with Türkiye. Israel openly supported a military solution for Azerbaijan's restoration of territorial integrity and Israeli weapons significantly [contributed](#) to Baku's victories in 2020 and 2023. Today, Israel [helps](#) Azerbaijan connect with the Trump administration while Baku mediates for Israel in informal contacts with certain Muslim or post-Soviet countries.

The poor state of Turkish-Israeli relations has no impact on Azerbaijan's bilateral ties with either Ankara or Tel Aviv. Both Middle Eastern powers respect Baku's sovereign and transactional diplomacy and do not try to impose their views on it.

Interestingly, the poor state of Turkish-Israeli relations has no impact on Azerbaijan's bilateral ties with either Ankara or Tel Aviv. Both Middle Eastern powers respect Baku's sovereign and transactional diplomacy and do not try to impose their views on it. On the contrary, it seems that Türkiye and Israel even keep the Azerbaijani channel open as a communication conduit for the future.

Enter Syria

After the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Syria was incorporated into Baku's Middle Eastern calculus. The Assads, long clients of Russia and Iran, had pursued policies broadly favorable to Armenia. Azerbaijan, aligned with Türkiye, severed all ties with Damascus at the outbreak of the civil war when Ankara supported the opposition. With Assad gone, however, relations have been restored. The new Syrian strongman, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has already [visited](#) Baku and Azerbaijan has begun exporting gas to Syria via Türkiye. At present, the volume [stands](#) at 1.2 billion m³, financed by Qatar, but this figure is expected to rise.

The fact that the new Syrian leadership is signing contracts with Baku and buying Azerbaijani gas carries a clear geopolitical weight.

The fact that the new Syrian leadership is signing contracts with Baku and buying Azerbaijani gas carries a clear geopolitical weight. Ahmed al-Sharaa, who needs to move toward normalization with Israel (still far from achieved), looks to Azerbaijan for support given that it is the only Muslim country maintaining excellent ties with Tel Aviv despite the Gaza war. The broader aim is to forge an alliance chain linking Azerbaijan, Israel, Türkiye, and Syria—with backing from the United States and the Gulf monarchies—designed to weaken and isolate Iran.

Cautious Appeasement of Tehran

And then there is Iran. Relations with Tehran have always been fraught. The former imperial patron still views Azerbaijan—at least in its imagination—as a “lost province.” The two countries' historical narratives and national identities hardly align, their political systems are diametrically opposed (Islamic Republic vs. secular Republic), and their geopolitical alliances place them on rival sides (Iran-Russia vs. Azerbaijan-Türkiye-Israel).

Yet, despite these seemingly irreconcilable differences, Aliyev has pursued a policy of accommodation with Iran, centering on his ties with President Masoud Pezeshkian—a pragmatic moderate inclined toward a softer line at home and abroad, unlike the hardline Revolutionary Guards and the religious establishment. Pezeshkian, himself from Mahabad in Iranian Azerbaijan, speaks fluent Azerbaijani. Aliyev even quipped in an interview that the Iranian president, who has already [visited](#) Azerbaijan twice—including a stop in [Shusha](#), the historic Nagorno-Karabakh capital reclaimed from Armenia—knows Azerbaijani poetry better than he does, a sign of their personal rapport.

Decades of mistrust and rivalry cannot be erased so easily. Iran's long-standing fear that Israel might use Azerbaijani territory as a launchpad for strikes is now compounded by anxiety that new transit corridors.

Still, decades of mistrust and rivalry cannot be erased so easily. Iran's long-standing fear that Israel might use Azerbaijani territory as a launchpad for strikes is now compounded by anxiety that new transit corridors—whether between Armenia and Iran or between Russia and Iran—could be disrupted following the Washington-brokered peace deal. The U.S. role in securing the Zangezur Corridor, even indirectly through a private company, only heightens Tehran's suspicions.

Aliyev, keen to avoid any conflict in Iran—both because of the potential unrest among Iran's 20 million ethnic Azerbaijanis and the catastrophic risks to Azerbaijan's oil infrastructure, its economic life-line—is working to defuse tensions by addressing Iranian concerns. He has assured Pezeshkian that the new TRIPP Route will not sever Iran's access to Armenia. On the contrary, Baku plans to fold this new road into the North-South connectivity network: goods bound for Iran from the north, instead of detouring across the Caspian (through Astara, where 250 km of railway remain unfinished on the Iranian side), could pass through Zangezur and reach the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan which is already connected to Jolfa and Iran's rail system.

Whether such assurances will persuade Tehran remains uncertain. For now, the fact that an American firm—even a private one—has been tasked with overseeing traffic along the Zangezur route is unlikely to inspire much confidence in Iran.

Azerbaijan and the EU: Business First, Politics Later

Azerbaijan has long abandoned the idea of European integration. I recall that back in 2010, when the Eastern Partnership countries [initiated](#) negotiations on Association Agreements with Brussels, my Azerbaijani colleague showed remarkably little enthusiasm. “We must first translate into Azerbaijani all the European texts, including the *Acquis Communautaire*, which many provisions of the Agreement — especially its economic part, the DCFTA — refer to,” he told me. I immediately understood that Baku would neither sign the Association Agreement, with its preamble rooted in the European rule of law model, nor negotiate the DCFTA, whose basic condition was the absence of monopolies and oligopolies. Indeed, that is exactly what happened: after a few rounds of negotiations, Baku withdrew.

Azerbaijan has always been, and remains, very interested in its energy partnership with the EU.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan has always been, and remains, very interested in its energy partnership with the EU. In this field, the interests of both sides converge, leaving wide room for cooperation. The EU has long sought to diversify its fossil fuel supplies to reduce its dependence on Russia while Azerbaijan aims to increase its exports to stable markets. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the EU embargo on Russian oil and gas, [agreements](#) between the EU and Azerbaijan have enabled increased exports through the Southern Gas Corridor, consisting of pipelines running from Baku through Georgia and Türkiye, and linking up with the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP).

In 2024, Azerbaijan [exported](#) 12.9 billion m³ of gas to the EU — nearly a 60% increase as compared to 8 billion [in 2021](#). The objective is to [reach](#) 20 billion m³ by 2027. The EU and eight of its member states (Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, and Slovenia) now [account](#) for more than half of Azerbaijan's global gas exports. The same [applies](#) to oil, with Italy remaining the leading destination, followed by Israel, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Germany, and others.

Baku believes that domestic politics should not be part of discussions with the EU. Instead, dialogue should focus mainly on economic, energy, and transport issues.

Baku believes that domestic politics should not be part of discussions with the EU. Instead, dialogue should focus mainly on economic, energy, and transport issues. The commercial corridor from China — the Middle Corridor, electricity exports, and the laying of fiber optic cables to create a digital IP corridor (Digital Silk Way) across its territory between Europe and Asia — are all priority topics Baku wishes to discuss with its European partners. The EU, for its part, has welcomed the Washington agreements signed with Armenia which include the creation of the TRIPP Corridor.

China and the Global South Dimension

An important component of Azerbaijan's 360-degree diplomacy is its positioning as a Global South state. Ilham Aliyev himself, in a recent interview with Chinese television, [declared](#) that Azerbaijan was a "member of the Global South." Among the former Soviet republics, Azerbaijan is the country that belongs to the largest number of multilateral organizations uniting Southern states. It is an active member of the Organization of Islamic Coop-

eration (OIC), the Non-Aligned Movement (which it chaired for two consecutive terms), and the Organization of Turkic States, among others. In 2024, Azerbaijan hosted COP29 (29th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), further boosting its international visibility.

"We want to be friends with all our neighbors and with the neighbors of our neighbors," Aliyev once [said](#) in an interview, expressing the essence of his transactional diplomacy. Azerbaijan today [has](#) nearly 70 embassies worldwide and when consulates-general and permanent missions to international organizations are included, the number of missions exceeds 90. By comparison, Georgia [has](#) fewer than 40 embassies and around 50 missions of all types combined.

As a "member of the Global South," Azerbaijan declares that it sees China as the leader of this group of countries. Azerbaijan has always staunchly supported the One China Policy and Beijing has reciprocated by supporting Azerbaijan's sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh. Likewise, Azerbaijan backs China in its struggle against Uyghur separatism, despite the Uyghurs being a Muslim and Turkic-speaking minority.

Azerbaijan [was](#) among the first to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015, signing a [strategic partnership](#) with China in 2024, later upgraded to a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) in July 2025 — the highest level of bilateral relations. In 2025, Azerbaijani citizens were granted [visa-free travel](#) to China, a right that Azerbaijan had previously [granted](#) to Chinese citizens in 2024. China was the first and only country so far to benefit from such a regime — a unique privilege since Azerbaijan grants visa-free entry only based on reciprocity.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Alat Port on the Caspian Sea make Azerbaijan central to the Middle Corridor, linking China to Europe via Cen-

tral Asia and the South Caucasus. Both Europe and China view this as a means to reduce their dependence on Russian routes. At Beijing's invitation, Azerbaijan participates in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an observer. However, its bid for full membership has so far been blocked by India (just as Pakistan blocked Armenia's candidacy).

The growing importance of China in Azerbaijani foreign policy is underscored by Aliyev's [attendance](#) at the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II in Asia, organized by China — even as he [boycotted](#) Russia's 9 May 2025 Victory Day celebrations, despite explicit [requests](#) from Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Tajikistani President Emomali Rahmon to use the occasion to mediate Azerbaijani-Russian tensions. It is also notable that the Chinese leadership [invited](#) both South Caucasian leaders, Aliyev and Pashinyan, shortly after the [signing](#) of their peace agreement and commitment to opening the Zangezur Corridor — signaling Beijing's interest in this project.

Azerbaijan seeks a mutually beneficial economic partnership with China, capitalizing on Russia's exclusion from global economic circuits.

In short, Azerbaijan seeks a mutually beneficial economic partnership with China, capitalizing on Russia's exclusion from global economic circuits. Baku looks for Chinese investments, which it considers politically less problematic, while China's support in multilateral formats strengthens Azerbaijan's position in various negotiations.

Contrast with Georgia

A comparative reflection on Azerbaijan's successful assertion of sovereignty and alliances, and Georgia's geopolitical [isolation](#) and drift under the Georgian Dream's leadership, offers some food for

thought for those affected by Georgia fatigue in Brussels and elsewhere.

The Georgian Dream government, eager for recognition from Europe but shunned because of its [slide](#) into authoritarianism, election falsification, and hostile rhetoric toward the West, often [complains](#) of being unfairly treated. It points to Baku, noting that although Azerbaijan is no more democratic than Georgia, the EU continues to conduct *business as usual* with it and the country suffers no European or American sanctions. Some in Brussels and other capitals, affected by *Georgia fatigue*, are also ready to conform to this new paradigm: 'Tbilisi itself suspended the European integration process which is a *fait accompli*. Now, we need Georgia as an important transit country and we can establish pragmatic relations with it, comparable to those we have with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, or even Uzbekistan and Algeria' — as one can hear here and there. Another article in this issue deals with other aspects of the irrelevance of this comparison; here, I will focus only on foreign policy.

The analysis of Azerbaijan's foreign policy and its multiple successes stands in stark contrast to the emptiness and impotence of Georgian policy. Baku succeeded in restoring its territorial integrity and had it accepted by the entire international community, including Armenia. It stands firm in the face of Russia which [uses](#) various destabilization and hybrid warfare tactics against it. Through wise, long-term policy, Azerbaijan has minimized the Kremlin's leverage. Moreover, Baku openly [supports](#) Kyiv's struggle for independence and territorial integrity, helping in various ways without fearing Russian reprisals, which sometimes materialize as in the [bombings](#) of Azerbaijani oil refineries located on Ukrainian territory (Kremenchug, Odesa). Despite this, the Azerbaijani president publicly receives the insignia of the Ukrainian Army and delivers speeches of support to the Ukrainian people.

By contrast, every day Georgia moves further from the dream of reunification, rewriting history through an illegitimate parliamentary commission that [blames](#) its own country for the war of aggression against the secessionist provinces — Russia's proxies. No Georgian Dream leader even dares to utter the word Russia when speaking about military aggression; instead, only the West is endlessly accused of imperialism, oppression, moral depravity, and warmongering — in perfect [alignment](#) with the Russian narrative.

Estranged from Europe, The Georgian Dream's Georgia has neither sought nor wanted to find a powerful ally that could help defend its sovereignty and independence if needed. Azerbaijan enjoys a fraternal alliance with Türkiye and deep cooperation with Israel; Georgia remains alone and defenseless in front of Moscow which, though weakened and bogged down in Ukraine, would have no difficulty in swallowing an unprotected country if it wished.

Azerbaijan optimizes its sovereignty and seeks to avoid all forms of interference in its affairs, above all Russian interference, and secondarily Western or Iranian interference. Georgian "sovereignism," by contrast, has only one [target](#): the West and the mysterious "Global War Party," and "Deep State" which makes it appear simply as rhetoric serving Russian interests — just as earlier speeches on Georgia's "[neutrality](#)" did.

Finally, both Azerbaijan and Armenia managed to win the goodwill of the Trump administration and draw it back into the region, providing guarantees for peace between the two former enemy countries. By mutual agreement, Aliyev and Pashinyan sidelined Russia from the conflict resolution process and invited the United States to return to a region where its influence had been waning since Putin's invasion of Georgia in 2008. Instead of attracting American interest in Georgia to make the country more secure against Russian ambitions,

the Georgian ruling elites [write](#) accusatory letters to the American president, quite unprecedented in the history of diplomacy. It is becoming clear that Ivanishvili and his party's initial support for Trump was based on the same hopes as Moscow's: that Trump's victory would cement Russia's domination of the post-Soviet space and definitively transfer Georgia into Russia's sphere of influence.

Ivanishvili's foreign policy is simply that of Russia's desiderata in the region: less Europe, less U.S., less Türkiye, and unchallenged Russian domination. With such a partner, even pragmatic relations are hard to build. A government that deliberately sabotages its European future when given a historic opportunity is not a government acting in the national interest — it serves a foreign power. And a government that accuses everyone who disagrees with it of being foreign agents ends up looking unmistakably like a foreign agent itself. Those Europeans who make comparisons with Azerbaijan should think twice.

The Azerbaijan Exception

Through a combination of transactional diplomacy, regional balancing, and careful management of great-power rivalries, Baku has leveraged its geography and energy assets into genuine sovereign influence.

Azerbaijan illustrates how a small, resource-rich, Shiite-majority state can carve out strategic space in a turbulent neighborhood. Through a combination of transactional diplomacy, regional balancing, and careful management of great-power rivalries, Baku has leveraged its geography and energy assets into genuine sovereign influence. Restoring territorial integrity, anchoring Europe's energy diversification, positioning itself along the Middle Corridor with China, and drawing U.S. atten-

tion via the Armenia peace track have all reduced Russia's coercive options while containing Iran's hostility. At the center of this approach lies consistency without ideology: align where interests converge, avoid binding commitments, and keep Türkiye as the core security pillar.

Still, the model comes with vulnerabilities. It relies on sustained Turkish support, U.S. engagement that may shift with electoral cycles, China's economic pragmatism, and delicate crisis manage-

ment with Moscow and Tehran. To consolidate its gains, Baku will need to institutionalize peace with Armenia, broaden its partnership with the EU beyond hydrocarbons, diversify transit corridors to reduce single-point risk, and bolster resilience against hybrid threats and diaspora-driven pressures. If it succeeds, Azerbaijan will remain what it seeks to be: a state friendly to many but dependent on none—an enduring example of small-power statecraft in an unsettled multipolar world ■

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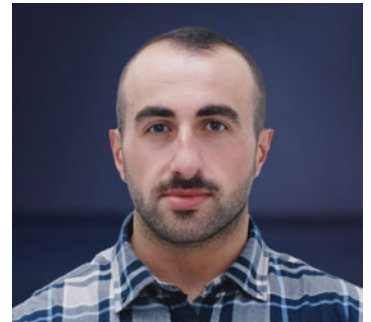
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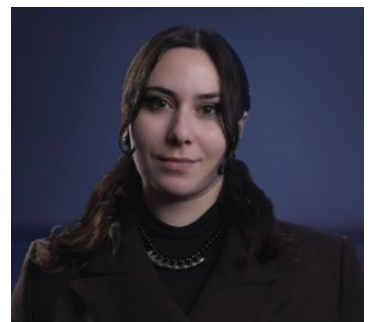
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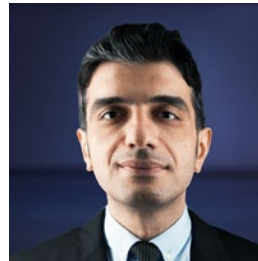
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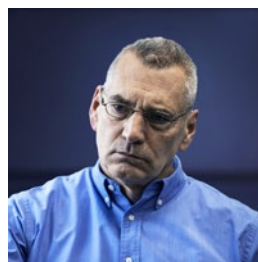
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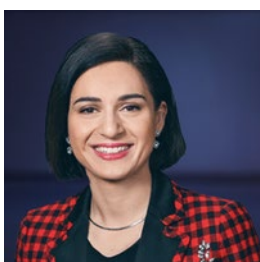
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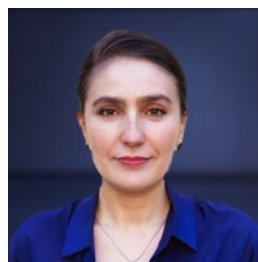
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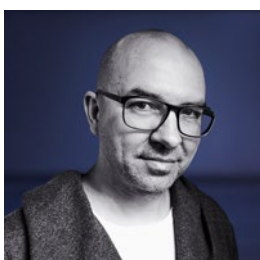
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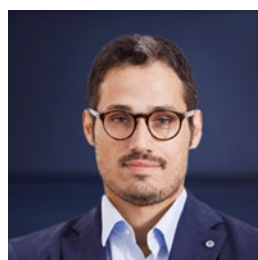
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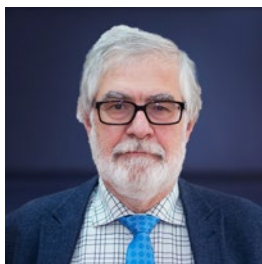
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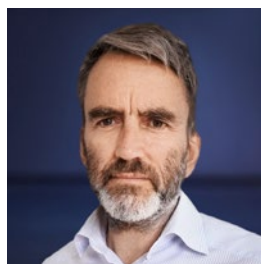
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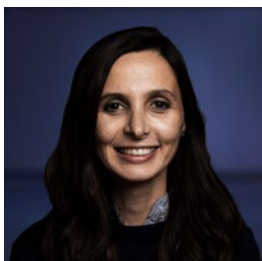
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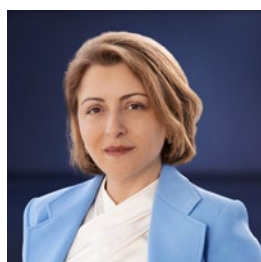
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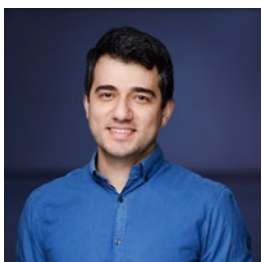
Grigol Mgaloblishvili

Ambassador Grigol Mgaloblishvili is a career diplomat with twenty years in Georgian Foreign Service. He has served as Prime Minister of Georgia, Permanent Representative to NATO, Ambassador to Türkiye, and faculty member at the U.S. National Defence University.



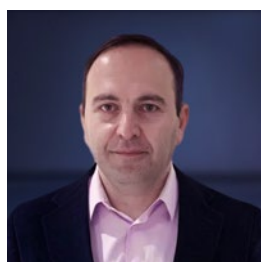
Eka Tkeshelashvili

Eka Tkeshelashvili is Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the German Marshall Fund and President of the Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies. Former Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Georgia, she led key Euro-Atlantic integration and justice reform initiatives.



Tornike Zurabashvili

Tornike Zurabashvili is a Tbilisi-based researcher focusing on political and security affairs in Georgia and the Black Sea region. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tbilisi State University and extensive experience in development program management across Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova.



Miro Popkhadze

Miro Popkhadze is a Senior Fellow at the Delphi Global Research Center and a Non-Resident Fellow at FPRI. A former Representative of the Georgian Ministry of Defense to the UN, his work focuses on Russian foreign policy and Eurasian security. He is pursuing a Ph.D. at Virginia Tech.



Galip Dalay

Galip Dalay is a senior fellow at Chatham House and a doctoral researcher at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on Türkiye, the Middle East, Russian foreign policy, and relations with the West. His work has been published in outlets like Foreign Affairs and Foreign Policy.

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