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Our Mission

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

In alignment with our ethos, our journal, entitled **GEOpolitics**, upholds a staunch dedication to the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. **GEOpolitics** will echo the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia can and must contribute to disseminating universal democratic values and contribute to regional and international security, and we will contribute to these objectives through our analytical and intellectual inputs.

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



Ana Khurtsidze

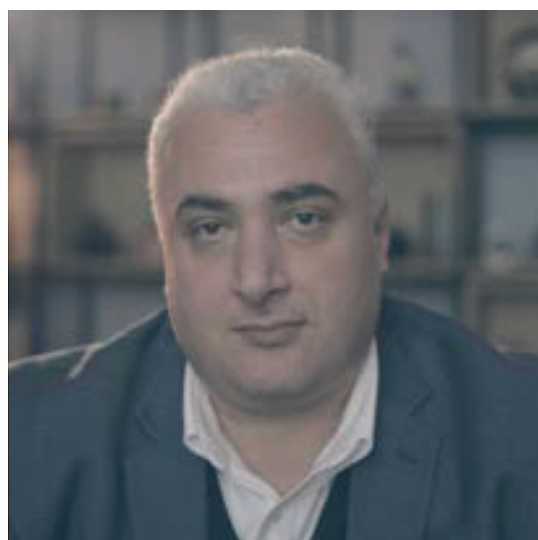
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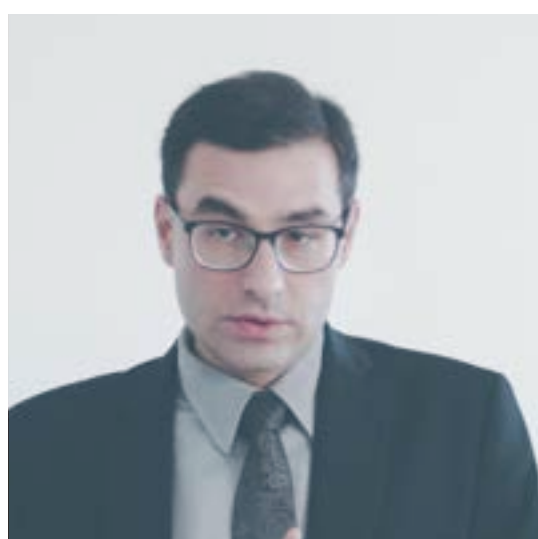
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A Policy Perspective on Georgia's Foreign and Security Landscape

Dear Readers,

Georgia's historical and cultural adaptation to surviving in a highly hostile environment while reaping the benefits of regional economic and political opportunities and maintaining its unique identity warrants meticulous exploration as the world becomes more dangerous for the small European states. This publication embarks on a monthly endeavour to delve into Georgia's foreign and security policy and Tbilisi's geopolitical narrative, providing an analytical lens to understand the multifaceted challenges and emerging opportunities that define Georgia's path.

The hostile military actions and intentions of our northern neighbour, Russia, persistently challenge our sovereign aspirations and territorial integrity. The occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia poses a generational quandary with the unsettling potential of annexation.

Positioned in a volatile region, Georgia faces its share of regional adversities. Russia's unwarranted aggression against Ukraine disrupts the European security fabric, undermining the role of Georgia in the broader European security architecture and the Black Sea region. In a situation of geopolitical uncertainty, the fears of further military escalation coexist with opportunities for creating peaceful and profitable co-existence based on open trade, transport, and communication links within a more peaceful South Caucasus and with the European Union. New opportunities for cooperation emerging in our neighbourhood not only recalibrate our foreign policy approach but also boost the evolving transit opportunities crucial for Georgia's strategic significance in the wider region.

Amid external pressures, Georgia's internal compass points decidedly westward. Our unwavering aspiration to align with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exemplifies our commitment to democratic tenets and international standards. This pro-European spirit, juxtaposed against the rise of domestic authoritarian inclinations, increasing anti-Western rhetoric and backsliding of democracy, necessitates well-informed, adaptive policies and honest discussions.

Yet, where challenges arise, opportunities often follow. Foremost among them is the EU's decision to open its doors to the membership of Eastern Partnership states, including Georgia. This gesture heralds a new era of cooperation and integration, placing Georgia at the cusp of a transformative phase. Opportunities, however, need to be grasped through the rigorous and unwavering implementation of the EU recommendations, something of which the current government has fallen short.

An unprecedented spotlight on the Black Sea region further unveils new geopolitical horizons for our nation. Now, more than ever, Georgia must harness its strategic potential as the gateway between the Western world and the East. For our Western allies, grasping this potential entails deeply comprehending Georgia's geopolitical aspirations, challenges and narratives.

In our view, in the grand strategic tapestry, Georgia could be not merely a regional actor but could become a cornerstone of broader regional stability. Our policy vision transcends immediate political and economic issues, emphasizing Georgia's significance in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

A critical aspect we intend to address regularly is Russia's pervasive use of disinformation and propaganda. The weaponization of information threatens not just our national narratives but also the integrity of democratic institutions. Moreover, domestic Georgian issues that intersect with our foreign policy will feature prominently in our discussions, providing insights into how internal dynamics can influence Western strategic interests in Georgia and the surrounding region.

Committing to this monthly initiative, we will illuminate the strategic concerns integral to Georgia's foreign and domestic policies. Through rigorous policy analysis coupled with academic discourse, we aspire to present a holistic overview of Georgia's position on the world stage. Our mission is to stimulate informed debate, guiding our nation's policy toward a harmonious blend of stability, democratic ethos, and strategic foresight.

As you immerse in the forthcoming articles and discussions, we urge you to engage with our content critically, discerning the nuances of Georgia's global positioning. This initiative is not merely an academic pursuit but a comprehensive examination of pressing policy matters that sculpt Georgia's contemporary narrative and future trajectory.

In closing, we recognize the magnitude of the task at hand. Covering the breadth of Georgia's foreign policy concerns is ambitious but our commitment is unwavering. We remain dedicated to presenting a balanced, in-depth perspective on all pivotal strategic issues, ensuring our readers remain informed, engaged, enlightened and entertained.

With respect,

Editorial Team

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Wind of Change

Wild is the Wind

Weathervanes across foreign policy establishments are spinning fast – the wind of change is blowing powerfully. Narratives, such as "interdependency avoids confrontation," yet again succumb to the grievances of something lost, be it an empire or a chance. Verbally expressed revanchism and the desire to redraw the world map have started to be followed by very much visible, and not virtual, kinetic actions with midlevel brutality seemingly extinct from our advanced and post-modern society.

It is hard to imagine, let alone articulate, practical "win-win" scenarios for the Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Hamas wars. The world is descending back into the zero-sum game where irreconcilable differences in ideology or methodology will prevent aggressors and victims from peacefully sharing the "common space."

Both conflicts confirm the enormous relevance of international order and the proper institutional mechanisms to maintain it, but they also expose the inadequacies and dysfunctions in existing multilateral, inclusive institutions. Shockwaves and hurricanes caused by both conflicts put these organizations in a role like Marilyn Monroe's notorious image, embarrassingly trying to remain unexposed.

Signs of inadequacy were already visible during the COVID-19 pandemic when national interests, local regulations, and tech-

nological advancements reminded us of the role of nation-states, underlining intrinsic inequalities and pushing back global agendas like climate change.

Waves of migrants to the US and Europe are not only affecting the fabric of local societies but are also generating counter-waves of a poetic and ideological kind. Walls, fences, and separation are becoming valuable instruments again, and a time when "the wall" referred to either in the Pink Floyd album or the architectural marvel of Chinese history is gone. Now, more brutal connotations, like the Iron Curtain or the Berlin Wall, are back in play.

Wars and confrontations are not the only reasons for the wind of changes. If we are in the midst of the fourth industrial revolution, then disruptive innovations of new industries will eventually affect politics, economics, and security on a global scale as they did during the previous three revolutions.

The year 2024 will be crucial. According to The Economist, half the world's population will go to elections in 76 countries. The remaining popularity of Donald Trump and the shocking presidential election results in Argentina might indicate a new trend in electoral politics. The year 2024 will signify a power struggle for autocrats to remain in power or the desire of the populations of democratic countries to see dramatic changes in the ways and the personalities conducting those policies. Selected, elected, or self-appointed officials will have the task of



navigating global challenges, and depending on the personalities in charge, political winds can blow in any unpredictable direction.

Georgia is among those 76 countries, and the results of the parliamentary election in the autumn of 2024 will largely determine the adequacy of the country and its political elite to withstand the challenges of global change.

[Candle in the Wind](#)

Amid the turbulence of international affairs, Georgia is not well-seated or properly fastened, probably not even in an appropriate place. Just a decade ago, Georgia was "punching above its weight," but those times are gone.

As a matter of fact, the current Georgian government has literally no international friend, sympathizer, or supporter besides the Hungarian Viktor Orban, whose "friendship" is just an exception that proves the rule. The foreign policy agenda remains foggy and contradictory, to say the least.

It should not be surprising, as the de facto governor/owner of Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili, declared from the beginning of his rule that Georgia should not be a "subject" of foreign policy but merely an "object." He publicly [praised](#) the "Armenian model" of foreign policy, which ended up disastrous for Armenia. He promised to "surprise Europe" with Georgian democracy, and Europe is truly surprised at how democracy in Georgia degraded so fast. He openly stated that the visitation of Western countries would "corrupt" Georgians, and now the number of Georgian asylum seekers in Europe and the US competes with similar numbers per capita from

war-torn countries.

How did Georgia, from being called a "beacon of liberty" and a "champion of transformation," end up in geopolitical limbo in just a decade?

The peaceful leadership change in the 2012 elections was mostly considered a step forward for Georgian democracy. The West's self-imposed "fatigue from mercurial Saakashvili" and the desire to either "reset" relations with Russia or continue "business as usual" created the illusion that Georgia would cement the achievements of the previous government and leap forward to economic prosperity and further institutional reforms under the Georgian Dream and its policy of the "normalization of relations with Russia." Multiple pieces of evidence that the anti-democratic behavior of the Georgian Dream and its leaders were undermining the democratic institutions in the country raised eyebrows among Georgia-supporters, but they labeled it as "zigzagging" in the right direction.

The further decline of political and democratic institutions really "surprised Europe," but internal discontent was labeled "polarization," implying that a negotiated solution could decrease tensions and advance the EU and NATO integration agendas. Realistically, the leadership of the Georgian Dream does not seek any "win-win" solution and does not want to compromise or weaken its grip on power for the sake of integration into the aforementioned institutions. That attitude was revealed multiple times, notably by breaking EU-negotiated deals with the opposition and avoiding any practical steps that would expedite or accelerate Georgia's inte-

gration into the EU or NATO.

The war in Ukraine became a tipping point when the poorly disguised anti-Western sentiments of the Georgian Dream manifested themselves into openly anti-Western rhetoric and actions. Distancing the country from the Western sanctions imposed on Russia, the groundless accusations of the West attempting to "drag Georgia into the war" and "instigating revolutionary changes" further widened the eyes of Georgia-watchers. The "surprise" quickly transformed into shock with a persistent feeling of nausea. Consequently, dealing with Georgia became a futile exercise for foreign policy practitioners, resulting in the disappearance of the whole country from the vocabulary of international issues discussed on major regional and global forums and platforms and from the active foreign relations agenda.

Even though every opinion poll conducted during the last decade still indicates strong support for Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration (i.e., membership in the EU and NATO), the policies and the actions of the Georgian government often contradict popular aspirations. Ignoring recommendations from various EU or US institutions, the Venice Commission, or the OSCE/ODHIR became an unfortunate routine. Meanwhile, the Russian-style political jargon of "sovereign democracy," clearly anti-democratic legislative initiatives, like the "law on foreign agents," accusatory language towards any criticism from Europe or America, be it individual or institutional, leave little doubt about the true intentions of the ruling elite and its puppet master.

If foreign policy reflects domestic policy, we

should not be astounded. Any Georgia-watcher understands that the major decisions in Georgia are only made with the blessing of or by Bidzina Ivanishvili from his compounds surrounded by his private zoo. We can safely assume that Georgia is the only country in the world governed literally from the zoo. The same observers can notice another unfortunate trend: the first president died under questionable circumstances, being hunted; a popular revolution ousted the second president; the third one is jailed and most likely poisoned; the fourth is stripped of any post-presidential privileges (pension, security, etc.) and the incumbent president is isolated, ostracized and just survived an impeachment.

As a result of the decade-long rule of the Georgian Dream, the political process in Georgia has almost ceased to exist. Political opposition, independent media, and independent non-governmental organizations are constantly labeled as "destructive," "enemies of the state," and "foreign agents." It is hard to recall the last time government officials engaged in public debate or discussion on TV or any other format about the issues of vital importance for Georgia. Rhetoric is followed by actions, too: political opponents are often persecuted, physically harassed, jailed, and intimidated. Such treatment of opponents then translates into the local and national elections, undermining their fairness, freedom of choice, and legitimacy.

Frustrated political opposition, civil society, and the media actively seek support and a sympathetic ear among external enthusiasts of Georgia's modernization, democratization, and Westernization. Against the background of silent and hibernating Georgian

diplomacy, the aforementioned groups are more visible actors in Georgian foreign policy than state officials. These groups do not coordinate among themselves and often compete fiercely. Nevertheless, their activities largely keep Georgia on the foreign policy agenda and the radar screens of the Western policy crafters and policymakers. Unlike the current government, this highly unusual "alternative diplomacy" effectively convinces Western friends and allies that the Georgian people still deserve their support. Without false modesty and exaggeration, we can safely state that granting Georgia the EU candidate status, alongside geopolitical considerations, was a result of such "alternative diplomacy."

Gone with the Wind

Self-imposed challenges and missing opportunities dominate Georgian foreign policy.

Self-imposed challenges and missing opportunities dominate Georgian foreign policy. Previous achievements were supposed to serve as a springboard to advance the foreign policy agenda, but it seems like the agenda has been cryptically modified and priorities reshuffled. It is not only the strategic trajectory of Georgia's foreign policy that is worrisome, but the cascade of dubious choices in bilateral and multilateral relations creates a heavy burden on Georgia's foreign policy.

From being a champion among the Eastern Neighborhood Policy (ENP) countries of the EU, Georgia became one of the most problematic cases. Individual EU member countries no longer hide their frustration with the inconsistent policies of the Georgian government. The consensus to grant Georgia the EU

candidate status reflects not the current achievements but further hopes and additional conditions that still need to be satisfied.

The US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Charter envisages the yearly visitation of senior government officials, the US Secretary of State, and the Prime Minister of Georgia. No such visit has occurred during the Biden administration, which is self-explanatory and sums up the current state of affairs well. On top of that, the erosion of the relationship is not only with the US executive branch. Every critical word from members of the Senate, Congress, or the mainstream media is "interpreted" by the Georgian Dream as the result of the lobbying activities of enemies and/or friends of the previous government while ignoring the merits of the concerns. The same fate is shared by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), USAID, and many other US-based institutions that "dare" to criticize the Georgian Dream and its leadership.

Georgia's immediate neighborhood is undergoing drastic changes, but the relationship with the neighbors is not handled any better. Conventional logic would dictate that one of the fiercest supporters of Ukraine should be Georgia, given so many similarities between them, whether the shared Orthodox Christian belief or the Russian aggression and occupation of both countries' territories. Nevertheless, among its neighbors, Georgia's worst relations are with Ukraine. Downgraded diplomatic relations reflect the hostile attitude of the political leadership of both countries toward each other. The deliberate policy of the Georgian government is not only to exclude itself from Western sanctions

against Russia but also to open avenues of cooperation with Russia, enabling loopholes for avoiding sanctions. The so-called "Saakashvili factor" is not the major impediment but "a cherry on the top." The demonization of the Ukrainian leadership in the mainstream pro-governmental media is almost a routine for the Georgian Dream.

Azerbaijan's impressive strides in foreign policy are noticeable against the background of its victory in Nagorno-Karabakh and the changing energy landscape of Europe due to Russian sanctions. At the same time, what used to be a dynamic relationship between Azerbaijan and Georgia since President Shevardnadze has now been transformed into a "maintenance mode" – merely handling the existing cooperation and shying away from any new and meaningful bilateral or regional projects.

Against the background of losing Nagorno-Karabakh, for the first time in its recent history, Armenia started to question its overdependence on Russia seriously and is exploring avenues of intensified relations with the West. Given its landlocked geography, Georgia can play a crucial role in approximating Armenia with the West, expanding stability and prosperity in the region. Instead, the Georgian leadership is peddling an unrealistic role of being an intermediary between Armenia and Azerbaijan, lacking any capacity or vision to perform such a function.

Turkey may change its name for foreigners to pronounce, but the essence of President Erdogan's foreign policy remains steady. Out of the declared "zero problems with neighbors" policy, perhaps Georgia was the only neighbor with indeed zero problems with

Turkey. Instead of properly capitalizing on this factor, Turkish-Georgian bilateral activities increased by zero percent and continued with the same intensity and dynamism as any legacy relationship.

Leadership changes in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and both countries' proactive foreign policy agendas opened new opportunities for engagement. At this moment, however, one can only notice the active operation of former Georgian government officials in the reform agendas of both countries and Georgia's private business initiatives, both well-established and highly valued. Central Asian countries actively diversify trade with Europe through alternative (to Russia) corridors. Nevertheless, Georgia is missing out on an opportunity to boost its role by introducing extra incentives and relevant government policies.

Moldova used to look at Georgia's transformation with envy and fascination. Today, it is shying away from any affiliation with Georgia, especially regarding its EU aspirations.

Russia, on the other hand, has become the „best friend“ of the Georgian Dream.

Russia, on the other hand, has become the „best friend“ of the Georgian Dream. Renewed flights (despite an aerial blockade from the West), not joining the Western sanctions, expanding economic cooperation with Russia (grown by several hundred percent), lifting visa restrictions by Russia and the inflow of questionable Russian capital, together with over a hundred thousand Russians, allegedly fleeing the war and sanctions, indicate this "friendship." Allegations

that Georgia is used to circumvent Western sanctions were [lauded](#) in the West. The Georgian opposition noticed the usage of Georgian ports for transporting sanctioned Russian oil and oil products. Leaked telephone conversations also support the notion that the country's leadership is in cahoots with certain Russian agencies and oligarchs.

[Ride the Wild Wind](#)

If the world around Georgia is changing, one can ask why the passive foreign policy, or as the government loves to call it - "stability," is a wrong choice and what the other alternatives are.

The best place to start will probably be with the father of scientific history and political realism, Thucydides. Three major factors that Thucydides identifies as the drivers of state decision-making in peace and war are fear (phobos/φοβος) or security, belief/honor (doxa/δοξα) or religion/ideology and interest (kerdos/κερδος) or livelihood/economy.

Security - Unless Georgia miraculously develops into the Israel of the Caucasus overnight, the ability to address security challenges alone or with minor external help is non-existent. Some naively believe in "neutrality," forgetting that neutrality is not just about one's decision but also the consensus of its neighbors. Given its geographic location and neighborhood, Georgia has never in its history managed to be a "neutral state," nor will it work now. The only remaining choice, therefore, is to be in a military alliance with only two on the menu - Western NATO or Russian CSTO. As George Kennan accurately observed, the Kremlin can distin-

guish only vassals and enemies in its neighborhood; hence, neither "neutrality" nor the CSTO are viable options for independent Georgia.

Meanwhile, NATO has proven to be one of the most durable, trustworthy, effective, and transformative alliances in modern history, even ready to consider Georgia as a member one day. But for the Georgian Dream, NATO membership is no longer on the agenda. The Prime Minister clearly stated that membership can only be possible after Russia solves the problem of Georgia's occupied regions, i.e., never.

Ideology - Samuel Huntington predicted a clash of civilizations where Orthodox Christianity was considered one of them. What we are observing now looks more like a clash within civilization. Orthodox Russia is at war with Orthodox Georgia and Orthodox Ukraine, with Muslim countries fighting each other more than the "infidels." Although Georgian history is mainly associated with being part of oriental empires, modern Georgians consider themselves part of the Western, Judeo-Christian world. The bitter experience of the Russian/Soviet empires further pushed Georgia toward the West, which successfully survived the collapse of imperialism and totalitarian ideologies and generated an attractive "soft power" to admire and one to aspire to. The younger generation of Georgians already considers a long list of Western values their own and wants to see an adequate political manifestation of their beliefs. In contrast, the Georgian Dream beats the anti-Western drum, claiming that it is the leading proponent of Christian, conservative values and that the West is pushing them to embrace same-sex marriage and the protec-

tion of LGBTQI+ groups.

Economy – Georgians enviously observed how former Eastern Bloc countries successfully transformed their failing economies through aspiration and integration into the European Union. At the same time, Russo-centric economies became highly vulnerable to manipulations from the Kremlin because of energy blackmail, halting exported goods for being “contaminated” and “poisonous,” declaring total trade embargos and weaponizing remittances and migration. In private corridors, Georgians hear multiple complaints from members of the Eurasian Economic Union about how the EU’s restrictive measures on Russia hurt their economies. Meanwhile, the echoes of problematic Chinese investments and assistance also reach Georgia. Given its geographic location, Georgia can play a vital role in east-west trade, being a reliable economic outpost of the EU in this axis. Therefore, Georgia’s membership in the EU is not only a civilizational choice but a practical, prosperity-oriented one. In contrast, the Georgian Dream lost a year and a half for receiving the candidate status recommendation from the EU, slow-rolled the reforms necessary for fast-tracking European integration, and dramatically increased its dependence on the Russian economy.

The issue of two Georgian regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, currently under Russian occupation, will remain on Georgia’s foreign policy agenda. Restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity is only feasible under two essential conditions: a strong and attractive Georgia and fundamental changes in Russian behavior in its neighborhood. Neither of these conditions can be achieved if Georgia remains

under Russian political or economic influence. Thus, the aspiration to see both provinces back under Georgia’s internationally recognized borders requires vigorously intensifying Georgia’s EU and NATO membership efforts.

In a nutshell, the wind of change is more challenging for inclusive regional and international organizations like the OSCE and the UN, whereas exclusive organizations, like the EU and NATO, are considered functional instruments poised to shape the upcoming European and international security order. Therefore, a country like Georgia needs to be part of the shaping mechanisms rather than part of a collapsing “Russian world” or a failed Chinese domination.

Western observers are often caught by surprise when Russian policies contradict Russian national interests, and the only rational explanation can be personal greed and a desire by the ruling elite to cling to power indefinitely. Unfortunately, the same logic applies to today’s Georgia, where state capture is evident by one super-rich man and his minions, where state interests are subjugated to personal phobias and greed.

If Georgia remains on the menu, it will sooner or later be served at somebody’s table.

As foreign policy experts love to say: “If you are not at the table, you are on the menu.” If Georgia remains on the menu, it will sooner or later be served at somebody’s table. Therefore, it is essential to produce a domestic wind of change, resulting in the reacquisition of the state by the people of Georgia for the people of Georgia ■

Fear and Loathing in Tbilisi

The rational choice explanation of Georgian Dream's confrontation with Brussels

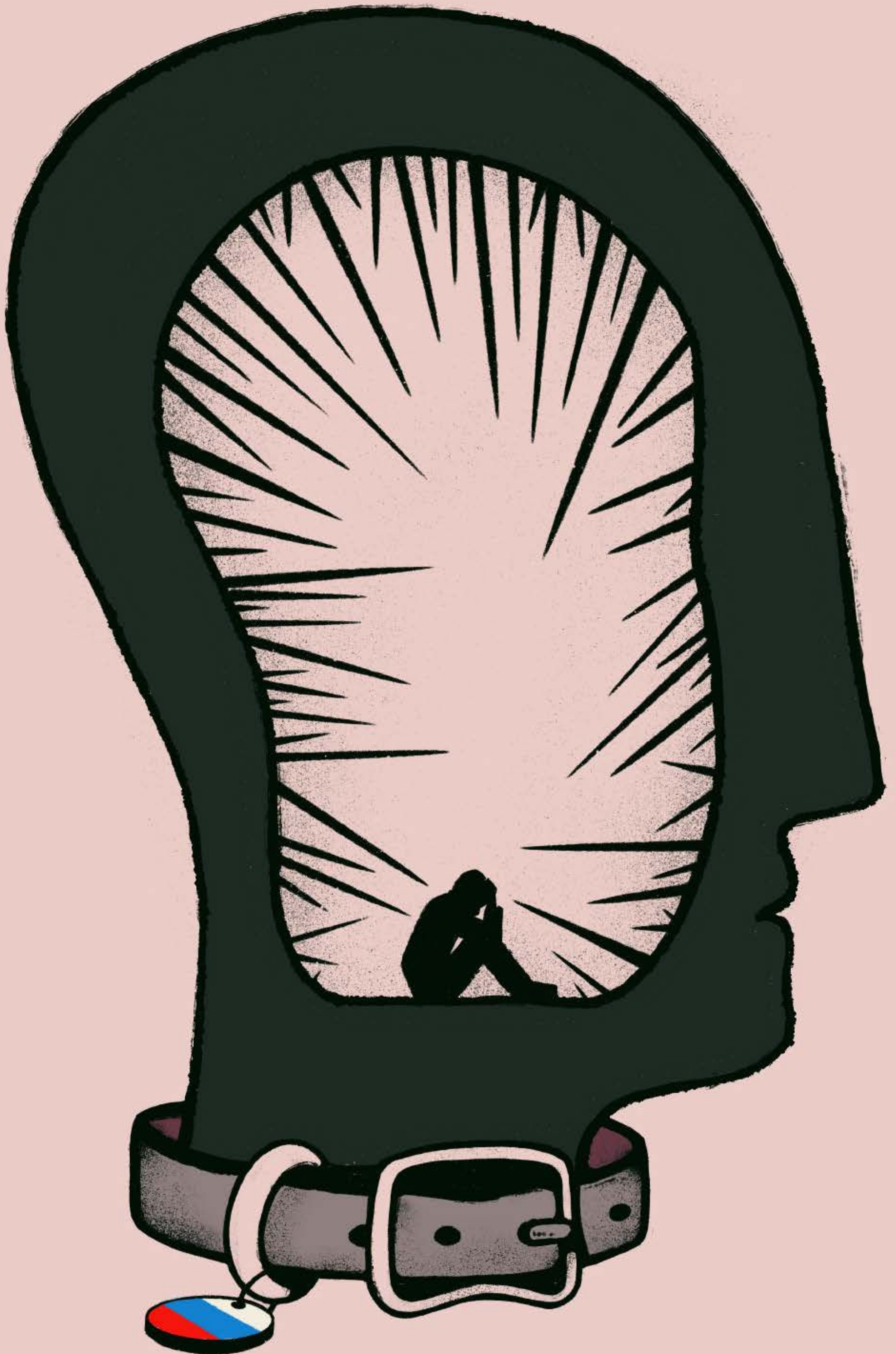
On November 8, the European Commission gave a positive recommendation to the member states regarding Georgia's candidacy to become a member of the European Union. As jubilating throngs laced many of the iconic locations of the capital, Tbilisi, one could not help but be overcome with an eerie feeling. Many Georgian diplomats have struggled for years to include the wording about "the European perspective" – the Commission's "shibboleth" for potential membership – in the Association Agreement. The AA, as it is often known, was finally signed in 2013 but was on the negotiating table for years, largely because of this very reason. When it was eventually signed, the wording included naming Georgia as an "Eastern European country" and "acknowledging the European aspirations and European choice of Georgia" – one of those "muddling through" compromises that obliged EU for nothing.

How the times have changed. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the "Geopolitical" Commission threw its doors open to Ukraine and its fellow members of the so-called "associated trio" – Moldova and Georgia. But even before that happened, and especially after Tbilisi filed the membership application, the top leadership of the ruling Georgian Dream party – including Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and party chairperson Irakli Kobakhidze spared no effort to berate the European Union and its various institutions, especially the European Parliament. These statements were echoed by the obliging

chorus of the ruling-party affiliated media, experts, and social media trolls.

Nor did they stop at words. By the last count, Georgia fulfilled only three of twelve relatively technical recommendations (read: conditions) for getting the candidacy. In the meantime, the ruling party has demonized the opposition and shrunk civic space to a considerable extent. The draft law on "Transparency of Foreign Funding," which would have hamstrung Georgia's vibrant civil society and whatever is left of the non-state-controlled media, was initiated by the ruling coalition (the opposition did not vote, while the three ruling party MPs who failed to vote "yes" were demoted and some forced to leave their MP mandates). Only massive – and rather surprising – public protest in March 2023 has forced the Georgian Dream to eat its hat and retract the law.

More importantly, Georgia's friends in Europe were taken aback by "bizarre" conspiracy theories that postulate the existence of the "global war party," which tries to drag Georgia into Russia's war with Ukraine. The conspiracy has been repeatedly aired at the highest formal political levels in Tbilisi. The alleged membership of the purported "global war party" varies. Still, PM Garibashvili and Chairman Kobakhidze have included Ukraine's top leadership, Georgian opposition, Georgian civil society leaders, some members of the European Parliament, EU, and U.S. donor agencies (USAID, EED),



specific U.S. non-governmental groups and also alluded to some ambassadors and executives from the U.S. and Europe.

A scholar of politics is left wondering – could such erratic behavior of Tbilisi be politically, or at least personally rational?

On the surface, looking at the outcomes, the policy did not backfire: Georgia got the candidacy, the unfulfilled recommendations were rolled over to the Council decision, and – given the short timeframe – might be rolled over further as preconditions to opening the accession negotiations. But this could have been a lucky outcome of risky opportunism: the shifting geopolitical winds could be blowing into Georgia's sails. The unrelenting support of the Georgian citizens to the EU membership also prevents Brussels from leaving Tbilisi out to dry: the electorates of Moldova and Ukraine (before the war) were far more divided on the issue than Georgians are.

But let us dig deeper.

Choices under uncertainty

We'd be advised to seek our initial clues into the nature of leadership in Georgia and the effect of the inherent incentives of such leadership on the nature of decision-making.

It is now widely acknowledged, both in academic analysis and in a political commentary, that the Georgian regime is oligarchic – that is, dominated by a person of considerable personal wealth – Bidzina Ivanishvili – who wields it to exercise political control over the normal state institutions. Some consider that the degree of such control has advanced to

the level of “state capture,” i.e., near-complete control of crucial institutions.

The fact that the cabinet of ministers is composed of Mr. Ivanishvili's personal aides, who often have very limited prior experience in the field of governance, testifies to a governance network based on personal allegiance rather than a democratic mandate.

Indeed, the EU's twelve recommendations/conditions highlight that their assessment essentially coincides with this view: the recommendation of “deoligarchization,” albeit vague in detail, is explicitly given, and several other ones go in the same vein: re-energizing independent institutions – courts, the public defender's office, anti-corruption agency, media, and civil society organizations.

It would be an exaggeration to think that “state capture” assumes the oligarch personally controls all governance decisions and the state's functioning. Mr. Ivanishvili has shown no inclinations of micro-management. Yet, it is reasonable to think that he is a crucial actor who can tilt the “raison d'état” in his favor whenever his major strategic interests are concerned.

This assumption reduces the usual complexity of internal state decision-making, with its multiple actors and diverging interests, to an almost hypothetical simplicity. Whenever it comes to crucial decisions, Mr. Ivanishvili's personal incentive structure prevails. From the point of view of the game theory, he is “the rational actor” who is engaged in an international “game” – a competitive interaction between rational actors whose interests conflict.

The European integration of Georgia is just a small part of a larger, high-stakes, tragic geopolitical game currently unfolding in Europe. Indeed, as argued above, the very possibility of Georgia integrating into the EU arose due to that game. Any game implies risks – for instance, a Georgian decision-maker must contend with Russia’s persisting military occupation of the two regions, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Having demonstrated its utter disrespect for international norms, not least by invading Georgia in 2008, Russia has considerably increased the odds of confrontation. So, there is a rational element of fear that may affect rational decision-making.

But a rational actor would also consider the probability of any additional military adventure by Moscow under the current circumstances or may strive to decrease such risks by, for example, beefing up its defenses – both in terms of military means and by seeking alliances. Conversely, the benefits of joining the European Union, or at least advancing rapidly on that path, are very high – at least in terms of prosperity and indirectly, through long-term stability that such a step may provide. In other words, generally, the current circumstances present a rational political actor with a high-risk game but also a high-gain one.

But what if we superimpose such conditions on an incentive structure that Mr Ivanishvili may face? Our information is limited, but some elements are in the public domain.

Firstly, Mr Ivanishvili’s capital has been made in Russia, and, according to most accounts, the Kremlin has consented to cash out and release these assets. It is reasonable to

assume that some financial obligations persist, and so do the more invisible, but no less tangible, expectations of loyalty. Both constitute the means of pressure. What is more, after Russia invaded Ukraine, [over thirty Russians](#) with considerable financial fortunes met with an untimely death [under suspicious circumstances](#). So, the element of fear weighs considerably more directly and presently in Mr Ivanishvili’s assessment of odds than it would for any other Georgian leader.

We can throw in a set of hypothetical positive externalities Mr. Ivanishvili may have, such as purely financial benefits from aiding influential partners from Russia to bypass or at least obfuscate the Western sanctions regime. A crucial element is time – both potential risks and benefits from Mr Ivanishvili’s “game” with Russia are short-term, personal, and near-immediate.

How does European integration look through Mr. Ivanishvili's incentive prism? First, the benefits of Georgia moving closer to and eventually joining the European Union will likely materialize in the medium to long term. While this process is ongoing, Russia can be rationally expected to counter-act – as it has threatened and done in Ukraine – especially personally in relation to Mr Ivanishvili and his assets.

Secondly, satisfying the conditions of Georgia’s accession to the European Union, such as the Copenhagen criteria of democratic governance and market economy, will likely dilute the oligarchic power. And even though Brussels has shown it is capable of co-existing with oligarchic regimes within the EU – after all, Czech ex-PM Andrej Babis or the

cronies of Hungary's Viktor Orban may have derived considerable financial benefits from the EU largesse – still, such coexistence is rather uncomfortable.

In other words, personally, Mr Ivanishvili is facing higher (perhaps existential) costs in upsetting his friends in the Kremlin in the short run than he derives benefits from playing by the EU rules in the long run.

Still, people are known to take the odds of high risks if they feel long-term benefits outweigh them – after all, nearly 80% of Georgians think that EU membership would benefit them.

So why does not Mr. Ivanishvili follow the same logic? We may argue that he faces an additional, perhaps crucial, layer of complexity. Georgia's governing oligarch knows from the inside Russia and the particular way of functioning of Putin's gangster regime. He is certain of what they can do but uncertain about what they will do. He is also far more uncertain than many Europeans are about the outcome of the larger game – which he sees as a showdown between Russia and the collective West for influence in the region. In other words, Mr Ivanishvili is facing a high-stakes game under the conditions of uncertainty. Under risk, one may still lose, but one knows the odds. Under uncertainty, not only can one still lose, but one does not know the odds.

The 1961 classic [study](#) "Risk, Ambiguity, and the Savage Axioms" by Daniel Ellsberg demonstrated that people prefer a risky choice to an uncertain one. In 1993, John Orbell [argued](#) in his "Hamlet and the Psychology of Rational Choice Under Uncertain-

ty" that the rational response to the problem of such uncertainty is to find a way around it, to avoid the problem, hoping to reduce uncertainty in the meantime.

That is a crucial distinction – (even) rational actors facing high-stakes decisions would prefer reducing uncertainty to risking or making efforts to affect the odds (negative or positive). In other words, their rational behavior is passive, based on avoidance of any decision.

Fear and loathing

The crucial decision-maker in Georgian politics at the current moment is mainly motivated by fear, which is augmented by uncertainty.

As shown above, the crucial decision-maker in Georgian politics at the current moment is mainly motivated by fear, which is augmented by uncertainty. One of the ways to reduce uncertainty is to avoid the problem and delay the decision until a higher degree of certainty is established.

Yet, even oligarchic leaders cannot govern against the people's will, and in times of crisis, people expect and demand action from their political leaders. One of the key elements of this demanded action in Georgia is seeking a political "shelter" inside the Western institutions, particularly the EU, as witnessed by massive public rallies when such movement was considered hampered.

To overcome the conundrum between the personal imperative to refrain from action and the democratic demand to do something, Georgia's governing party has been deploying the rhetoric as a tool for "the ne-

gotiation of the distance between protagonists on a given question,” as Michel Meyer [explained](#) in his “What is Rhetoric?”

In responding to these challenges, official Tbilisi has been borrowing heavily from one of the leading ideologues of the “illiberal Europe,” Hungary’s Viktor Orban, who, incidentally, became one of the key lobbyists for Georgia’s European integration. The commonality of context and an instinctive ideological affinity are likely to have drawn Tbilisi towards Budapest. Just like the Georgian Dream government, Orban’s Fidesz had to work with a widely pro-European electorate to further its hold on power. As Greg Agoston [showed](#), Orban successfully devised a set of rhetorical approaches to define its political legitimacy in pursuing the national interest and portraying EU membership as a means to serve those interests better – often counter to the intentions of the EU institutions and other members.

In the same vein, the Georgian Dream uses two related rhetorical reasonings to increase its proximity with the majority of the voters while simultaneously increasing the distance from the European/Western actors. On the one hand, the Georgian Dream attempts to prove that the concerns and fears of the oligarch are intricately linked with the fears of the Georgian nation. On the other hand, Georgian Dream portrays Ivanishvili and the Georgian people in the same camp, resisting European pressure and defending Georgia’s national interests from Western encroachment.

Oligarch’s fears are people’s fears!

The first rhetorical line is to generalize the

oligarch’s fears onto the general population (the nation) and, by doing so, to seek equivalence rhetorically and perceptively between the stance of Mr Ivanishvili and the national interest. In other words, the Georgian Dream wants Georgians to believe that inaction on the war in Ukraine and passiveness (or even resistance) to fulfilling the demands of the European Union are in the national interest.

The most obvious and perhaps most blatant instance of building such equivalence was [made by Bidzina Ivanishvili himself](#) in an open letter, that “certain forces actively tried to drag Georgia into the [Ukraine] war, and this desire and goal of theirs, unfortunately, is still relevant today” while the ruling party “worked correctly, took a correct and principled position, and overcame the main difficulty of the first stage of the threat of war.” In the same statement, Mr. Ivanishvili formally dismissed but rhetorically confirmed the alleged linkage between the war conspiracy that his party pundits have been advancing and his personal financial problems with Credit Suisse Bank. The chair of the Georgian Dream [argued](#) that by creating difficulties for Ivanishvili to access some of the assets at Credit Suisse, “someone is attempting to make Bidzina Ivanishvili return to Georgian politics against his will so that the country joins the [Ukraine] war.” To further decrease the distance from voters, Ivanishvili said that the money was intended for public benefit.

The Georgian Dream leaders often present Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine as a “punishment” for its overzealous pro-Western foreign policy. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili [claimed that](#) “any patriotic government must do everything to help the country and its people avoid the greatest ca-

lamity, the ordeal, which is war. I am acting in this spirit, with this responsibility.”

The demand for action – which is, as we have shown, contrary to the oligarch’s imperative to avoid doing so – is equated with “insisting that Georgia joins the war.” In March 2023, when pro-European protests engulfed the capital, Garibashvili [pleaded](#) – “let’s imagine that there is a war in Georgia today; we all know what will happen here – our beautiful country will turn into a firing range. This is not an exaggeration; this is a real threat!”

Europe of sovereign interests

The second rhetorical line that Georgian Dream pursues is to create a perception that Mr. Ivanishvili and the Georgian nation stand together against malicious Western/European actors, but without negating the objective of (eventually) joining the European Union. This approach aims to reconcile the declared pro-European stance of the majority of Georgians with the increasingly Euro-skeptic rhetoric of the Georgian government. This closely follows the tactics of Viktor Orban, who used the migration crisis to set himself as a protector of the national interest against Western European supranationalism.

In Hungary, Orban presented the foreign policy tradition of the socialist-liberal governments as “euroservile,” arguing that Hungary “will not be a colony” and describing its skirmishes with Brussels about human rights as a “freedom fight.” In Georgia, Garibashvili – drawing on the context of the war in Ukraine – [pledged](#) that he, as “a person responsible to our country’s populace and as the head of government, responsible for do-

mestic as well as foreign policy, will lead based on national interests.” An MP affiliated with the ruling majority [coined the phrase](#) “Dignity is above the EU candidacy” in 2022, and by 2023, “To Europe with Dignity” became the Georgian Dream’s EU policy’s [slogan](#).

Like Budapest, Tbilisi also says sovereignty is a prime factor in its future relationship with Europe. The Christian identity and concerns about natality and migration [undergird these notions of sovereignty](#) – a stance strongly supported by the Georgian Orthodox Church. While visiting Tbilisi, Viktor Orban [stressed Georgia’s Christian identity](#) as the main marker of its European identity. Just like Orban, Tbilisi pursues cultural and civilizational distancing from Western Europe, arguing for the preservation of the conservative Christian traditions against the purported onslaught of “immoral” liberal values. At the same time, it portrays Georgia as a protagonist of “true” or “traditional” Europe, which has nothing to learn from and nothing to prove to the West.

Through this rhetorical feat, the Georgian Dream attempts to portray itself on the side of the Georgian people and simultaneously for Europe, but against the current Western elite of the European Union.

Conclusion

The current government in Tbilisi is strongly beholden to the personal interests of one man, Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose personal loyalties and personal financial interests are, in turn, linked to Moscow. The uncertainty of the current political moment creates unpre-

dictable, existential risks for Mr Ivanishvili, and his primary incentive, motivated by fear, is to do nothing until the uncertainty recedes.

The Georgian Dream government is projecting this motivation structure onto the Georgian population, insisting it serves the national interest. Yet, despite the rhetorical contraptions deployed, this is not necessarily the case. While the fog of war indeed warrants pragmatism, the true pragmatic approach would have also dictated, for example, increased military spending and procurement of air defense capabilities, caution towards migratory flows from Russia, cultivation of the relationship of trust with the Western partners, in particular the U.S. and the EU. Yet, the contrary steps are taken.

Tbilisi, driven by self-interest, adopts the public relations and rhetoric devices not so much directly from Russia but increasingly from the European and U.S. “illiberal leaders,” such as Viktor Orban and Donald Trump.

Hungary’s membership in the European Union is a powerful domestic argument for the sovereignist, identitarian stance being compatible with the European identity. Yet, there is a significant difference: Georgia is seeking membership in the European club, already irked by Orban’s intransigence. Adopting “Orbanist” cliches is thus clearly not in Georgia’s long-term national interest, even in the narrow sense of seeking EU membership.

It is worrying that the Georgian Dream is succeeding in drawing the dividing line in a way that positions Georgian voters on the same side with sovereignist and identitarian discourse against the EU values.

It is worrying that the Georgian Dream is succeeding in drawing the dividing line in a way that positions Georgian voters on the same side with sovereignist and identitarian discourse against the EU values. Fear of war and the concern about Europe being damaging to the preservation of Georgia’s national identity have crept up significantly in the opinion polls, largely due to the Georgian Dream media machine churning out the relevant content through both traditional and online media, aided by the army of paid accounts and fake campaigns.

Certainly, Georgia’s democratic class and civil society are primarily responsible for responding to these domestic challenges. Yet, the European Union and the European capitals must learn lessons from the damaging impact of populist and illiberal rhetoric of the electorate and democratic institutions of Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. As fears of populist revival in key European states – France and Germany – mount, open partnership and clear communication between democratic actors are the only way to reduce uncertainties sufficiently to break the democratic paralysis. The European actors must work together to fill the political and rhetorical arguments for stronger integration, a higher degree of solidarity, and more democracy with real meaning to the Union’s current and aspiring citizens.

2024 – A Juncture Point for Georgia's European Path

November 8, 2023, marked a significant milestone in Georgia's quest to join the European Union. On this day, the European Commission included Georgia's dossier in the EU enlargement package for the first time and advised the European Council to grant EU candidate status to Georgia.

This pivotal suggestion will be considered in the Council's mid-December deliberations. Georgia's candidate status is conditional, with the stipulations now numbering nine, a reduction from the previous 12. However, these conditions are notably specific, challenging to fulfill without political will, and measurable. With only three of the 12 original conditions being met by Georgia, the European Commission has revised the remaining objectives, integrating them into a new set of priorities, including additional tasks.

Georgia's efforts towards EU accession and the necessary reforms are expected to become central themes in the upcoming election campaigns, heavily influencing the political discourse.

The Commission plans to re-evaluate Georgia's advancements by the end of 2024. Coinciding with this timeline, the EU enlargement package presentation is anticipated to occur around the same time as Georgia's general elections, which are slated for late October. Consequently, Georgia's efforts towards EU accession and the necessary reforms are expected to become central themes in the upcoming election campaigns, heavily influencing the political discourse.

Dem Georgischen volke!

The European Commission's endorsement for the European Council to confer candidate status upon Georgia rests on three pivotal factors:

Firstly, the Commission acknowledged the determined stance of the Georgian people who ardently support EU integration and successfully thwarted attempts by the Georgian Dream to pass legislation reminiscent of Russian foreign agent laws in March 2023.

Secondly, the Commission held its strategic consideration to maintain Georgia's alignment with Moldova's and Ukraine's EU trajectories and not allow an increase in the gap.

Thirdly, the Commission recognized the Georgian government's limited progress in addressing the 12 recommendations.

When presenting the Georgian file, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, [was](#) crystal clear, stressing the will and the determination of the Georgian people. According to her, the European Commission “fully supports the genuine aspirations of the overwhelming majority of Georgian citizens to join the European Union. These aspirations need to be better mirrored by the authorities who should engage more with the opposition and civil society on matters of national interest.”



On the same day, the European Commission recommended opening accession negotiations with Kyiv and Chisinau, sending a clear signal to Russia that the EU would neither abandon Ukraine and Moldova nor leave Georgia and its people behind, encouraging Georgian society to push the authorities to deliver on EU reforms.

The European Union's aspiration to deepen ties with Armenia should also be factored into the context of its decision regarding Georgia. In autumn 2023, Azerbaijan's offensive military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrated that Russia is not able to provide security guarantees to Armenia despite its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Area. In response, disappointed Yerevan, well aware of growing anti-Russian sentiments, started rapprochement with the EU. The leaders of Germany and France and the EU institutions also welcomed this desire of the Armenian leadership. The EU seems willing to initiate a visa liberalization dialogue and extend assistance to Armenia through the European Peace Facility. Thus, the EU's approach indicates a broader strategy of engagement and partnership with the region.

Finally, the European Commission took good note of the fact that the Georgian authorities demonstrated limited progress in implementing the 12 conditions mentioned above. Only three out of 12 criteria - ECtHR rulings transposition into the national legislation, electing the Public Defender and ensuring gender equality, were fully met. These reforms were politically less sensitive; thus, their fulfillment posed no threat to the Georgian Dream's quest to maintain power for a fourth consecutive term in October 2024.

Nine steps towards the talks

The Commission's recommendation on granting candidate status comes with nine conditions the Georgian authorities must fulfill to start accession negotiations. The European Union has not set a timeline for initiating accession talks, leaving the timing to the pace at which the Georgian Government addresses and completes the nine specified priorities. The European Commission's next enlargement package and the assessment of Georgia's progress is scheduled for autumn 2024, coinciding with Georgia's October 2024 general elections.

The Georgian Dream must prove that it is possible to move to the next stage of EU accession with the Georgian Dream in office.

Because of this overlap, European integration is expected to play a significant role in the pre-election campaigns of Georgian political parties. The Georgian Dream must prove that it is possible to move to the next stage of EU accession with the Georgian Dream in office. Meanwhile, the opposition parties must provide clear ideas on implementing reforms and fulfilling the conditions. They also face the challenge of proving to the electorate and the European Union that they are better fit to move Georgia closer to EU accession.

The European Commission did not allow the Georgian Dream to get away with unfulfilled priorities or window-dressed reforms. The Commission modified and incorporated the conditions of deoligarchization, depolarization, the fight against corruption, and judiciary reform in the new nine priorities. Ensuring free, fair, and competitive elections in

2024 was underlined as a new precondition, focusing on “ensuring adequate representation of the electorate.” This demand is interpreted as a hint to create a more conducive environment for Georgian immigrants scattered worldwide, who often turn out in low numbers to the polls due to limited polling stations opened abroad. “Adequate representation” could also be considered a subtle push to lower the electoral barrier from 5%.

The Commission also introduced new conditions in those areas which blatantly deteriorated or where Tbilisi showed no progress. The EU now officially requires Georgia to align its foreign policy with the EU. From 2020 to 2022, Georgia’s alignment rate dropped from 61% to 43%. Last year, Georgia did not align with the EU’s sanctions against Russia, including the airspace closure and the restrictive measures against Belarus. Georgia also did not join EU common positions on Iran, Türkiye, and several African countries and did not align with the statements and sanctions under the EU Global Human Rights regime. The ruling party argued that aligning with these sanctions would contain risks for Georgia’s non-recognition policy of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia or would negatively impact Georgia’s economy. Considering this reality, the Georgian Dream will have to find a balanced approach to address these EU requirements and ensure that the non-recognition policy is not threatened.

The EU also requested that Georgian authorities deal with the fight against disinformation and foreign information manipulation interference directed against the EU and its values. This priority seems to refer to the Georgian Dream’s anti-European and an-

ti-Western propaganda, which picked up pace after Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified attack on Ukraine and the EU’s decision not to grant Georgia candidate status in June 2023. The anti-EU propaganda often originated from the far-right Alt-info group and the government-sponsored/controlled media however, Georgian Dream leaders often fueled it for their political purposes. One of the leading accusations towards the EU and European officials was that the EU was demanding that Georgia open a second front against Russia.

Last but not least, the EU also expects Georgia to ensure the institutional independence and impartiality of key state institutions like the Central Election Commission (CEC), the National Bank of Georgia (NBG), and the Communications Commission (GNCC) since these institutions are often instrumentalized by the ruling party to achieve political goals and gain political capital.

A major sign of concern about the independence of the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) emerged in the summer of 2023 when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) delayed the second review of Georgia’s Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) because of the structural changes in the NBG management by the Parliament. The President vetoed the amendment, but the Georgian Dream overrode it. As a result, the Georgian Dream’s ex-Minister of Economy, Natia Turnava, became the NBG’s acting President. Another blow to the institutional independence of the NBG was made in September 2023 when the US State Department imposed sanctions on former Georgian Prosecutor General Otar Partskhaladze for cooperating with the Russian FSB and influencing Georgian society and politics in favor of Russia. This was followed by Natia Turnava’s excep-

tional decree preventing the implementation of international sanctions on Georgian citizens unless they were found guilty by a Georgian court. In protest of the decree, three vice presidents of the NBG resigned, creating a leadership vacuum in the Central Bank, promptly filled in by the Georgian Dream Parliamentary majority with the party loyalists with dubious professional backgrounds.

The Commission also noted the importance of the GNCC's independence following a years-long discussion in Georgia about the interference of the GNCC in the editorial policies of the critical broadcasters and favorable treatment of the pro-government media. In autumn 2023, the Parliament amended the Law on Broadcasting to the surprise and the dismay of Georgian CSOs and the media, transferring hate speech and obscenity from the realm of self-regulation by the broadcasters to the regulation by the GNCC. This gave the GNCC the power to sanction broadcasters critical of the government. The EU, which allegedly endorsed the proposed change by the Georgian Dream, responded to this by underlining the independence of the GNCC as one of the preconditions for Georgia's further European path.

Regarding the Central Election Commission, the issue is related to the election process of the chairperson and the Commission's members. The chair and the professional members (8 out of 17) of the Central Election Commission are selected by the Chair of the Parliament of Georgia (a political figure) and approved by the Parliament with a simple majority. This leaves a massive opportunity for the ruling party to influence the process. The political agreement reached in April 2021

with the mediation of the European Council's President Charles Michel provided for the high quorum appointment of the Commission Chair; however, the Georgian Dream reneged on the deal a few months after signing it, and the composition of the CEC has been a major area of disagreement with the opposition and civil society since then.

In the previous set of 12 conditions, the EU expected Georgia to address high-level corruption cases, although the Georgian Dream limited itself to establishing the Anti-Corruption Bureau without investigative functions with its head appointed by the Prime Minister. In 2022, seven high-level officials were prosecuted, and six were convicted of corruption. In the new set of conditions, the EU expects Georgia to establish a "strong track record" in investigating corruption cases and have appropriate follow-up on high-level corruption cases. This request could be one of the hardest for the Georgian Dream to implement since the anti-corruption bureau has not followed up on any corruption allegations made by investigative journalists and opposition politicians towards the Prime Minister and high-level Georgian Dream members.

The European Commission also maintained the deoligarchization requirement, albeit by switching its attention to the action plan that the Georgian Dream prepared without consulting any major political or civil society stakeholder. Initially, the Georgian Dream copied the Ukrainian law on deoligarchization, but after receiving a clear [message](#) from the Venice Commission to apply a systemic approach instead of a personal one, it came up with an action plan which it shared with the European Commission, but not with the

civil society or the opposition parties until the European Commission's recommendation of November 8. In response, the European Commission tasked the Georgian Dream with "improving the current action plan to implement a multi-sectorial, systemic approach to deoligarchization in line with Venice Commission's recommendations and following a transparent and inclusive process involving opposition parties and civil society."

Among the nine new conditions, minority and human rights protection, the media, and civil society-related priorities were grouped. The ruling party demonstrated no progress in investigating and prosecuting the organizers of the violence against journalists on July 5, 2021, and against the private Tbilisi Pride event on July 8, 2023. The government has also not investigated cases related to the wiretapping of journalists and other attacks against them. The lack of cooperation with civil society organizations and the attempt to label all foreign-funded NGOs as "foreign agents" and "spies" almost destroyed the trust between the third sector and the government. These developments led the European Commission to task the Georgian Dream again with "consulting and engaging with civil society, allowing for their meaningful involvement in legislative and policymaking processes" and ensuring that CSOs "operate freely."

Less time for more reforms

The new nine priorities are more politically sensitive, giving the Georgian Dream a second chance to deliver on them.

The new nine priorities are more politically

sensitive, giving the Georgian Dream a second chance to deliver on them. The ruling party must now demonstrate strong political will and convince the voters that it can carry the country into the EU accession process. Unlike the previous stage, the Georgian Dream now has less time to prove that it is serious about EU membership and keen to conduct reforms.

The Georgian Dream took 18 months to implement only three of the 12 conditions, while it now has less than 11 months to deliver on nine, which are more robust, wide-ranging, and arduous than the previous 12. In addition to the already discussed reforms, the ruling party must show significant progress on the priorities it failed to address in 2023.

Namely, clear measures are expected to be taken in judicial reform. The European Commission [requested](#) that Georgian authorities "establish a system of extraordinary integrity checks, with the involvement of international experts with a decisive role in the process, for candidates and persons currently appointed to all leading positions in the judiciary; in particular, the HCJ [High Council of Justice], the Supreme Court and court presidents." This condition is the biggest headache for the ruling party, considering that they have repeatedly used the judiciary for their political interests through the influential group of judges known as the "clan." Three "clan" members were recently sanctioned by the US State Department for corruption, causing dismay for the Georgian Dream and the Prime Minister's public expression of support for the sanctioned judges.

The Georgian Dream will face another outstanding priority - depolarization, which rolled over from the previous 12. Polarization is a useful political tool for the government, used to demonize political opponents and mobilize the voters. In the condition of proportional elections in 2024, the more polarized the society, the better the incumbent's chances to garner approximately 40% of the votes, which could be sufficient for continuing the one-party rule. This priority hangs over the ruling party as the sword of Damocles since it needs to win the elections and demonstrate sufficient progress vis-à-vis the European Union.

Another opportunity not to be missed

Georgia's European integration process will reach a juncture point in 2024 with the opening of accession talks at stake. Moldova and Ukraine will likely have cleared this hurdle when Georgian progress is assessed in late 2024. The political will and the determination of Georgia's leaders will be critical for implementing the necessary reforms for the EU accession talks to start. While the Georgian Dream has successfully delivered on three less contentious priorities, their strategy of picking the low-hanging fruits may not suffice this time. The European Union has recalibrated its expectations, emphasizing political reforms that may not align with the Georgian Dream's primary objective of securing a fourth consecutive term in power. The EU-pushed reforms may not necessarily serve the ruling party's interests but are demanded by the pro-European public and civil society, which expect tangible progress on EU integration. Therefore, the EU's focus on predominantly political and democratic con-

ditions for beginning accession talks presents a significant challenge to the Georgian Dream's interests.

The European Commission recommended granting candidate status to Georgia largely because of geopolitical factors and the Georgian people's European identity.

The European Commission recommended granting candidate status to Georgia largely because of geopolitical factors and the Georgian people's European identity. The EU is expected to be more inward-looking in 2024, busy with the European Parliament elections in spring and forming the new College of Commissioners in autumn. These leave the Georgian Dream ample opportunity to maneuver and avoid the EU's stern assessments.

Since gaining independence, foreign policy has seldom been a focal theme in Georgia's election campaigns. Yet, given the current dynamics of Georgia-EU relations, European integration is anticipated to emerge as a critical issue in the forthcoming electoral debates. Opposition parties will need to articulate their strategies for implementing the nine priorities outlined by the EU, essential for commencing accession talks. On the other hand, the European Union anticipates that the Georgian Dream will align with the European aspirations of the Georgian people and collaborate with the opposition and civil society – the very groups it has previously labeled as “foreign agents” and “traitors.”

This period represents a critical juncture for Georgia's path toward the EU, necessitating commitment and political resolve. Failure to seize this opportunity could result in an indefinite postponement of Georgia's EU membership ambitions. ■

Anti-Western Propaganda – The Georgian Dream’s All-purpose Fix

In "[Propaganda in Autocracies](#)," Erin Bagott Carter and Brett L. Carter describe how authoritarian leaders rely heavily on sophisticated propaganda to manipulate and control public opinion. Autocrats foster a fear-based belief that power ultimately resides in the hands of citizens, and when citizens decide, even the most ruthless dictator loses power. To counter this, they employ propaganda to manipulate public opinion and undermine and weaken democratic institutions, which are the shackles of their ever-expanding power. Through propaganda, these leaders aim to confuse and disorient the population, spreading false narratives and distorting truths. This systematic use of propaganda and disinformation becomes a crucial tool for authoritarian rulers, aiding in maintaining and consolidating their power.

Georgia is on such an authoritarian track. Western policymakers have [expressed](#) “deep concerns about Georgia’s democratic trajectory,” and [according to](#) Freedom House, “public skepticism over the direction of governance, the state of the economy and disenchantment with the party system, including the ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD), had reached its peak.”

Local Georgian NGOs often [speak](#) of the overwhelming propaganda narratives from the Georgian Dream, aimed at everyone who dares to criticize their policies and choices. The European Commission, when recommending granting EU candidate status to

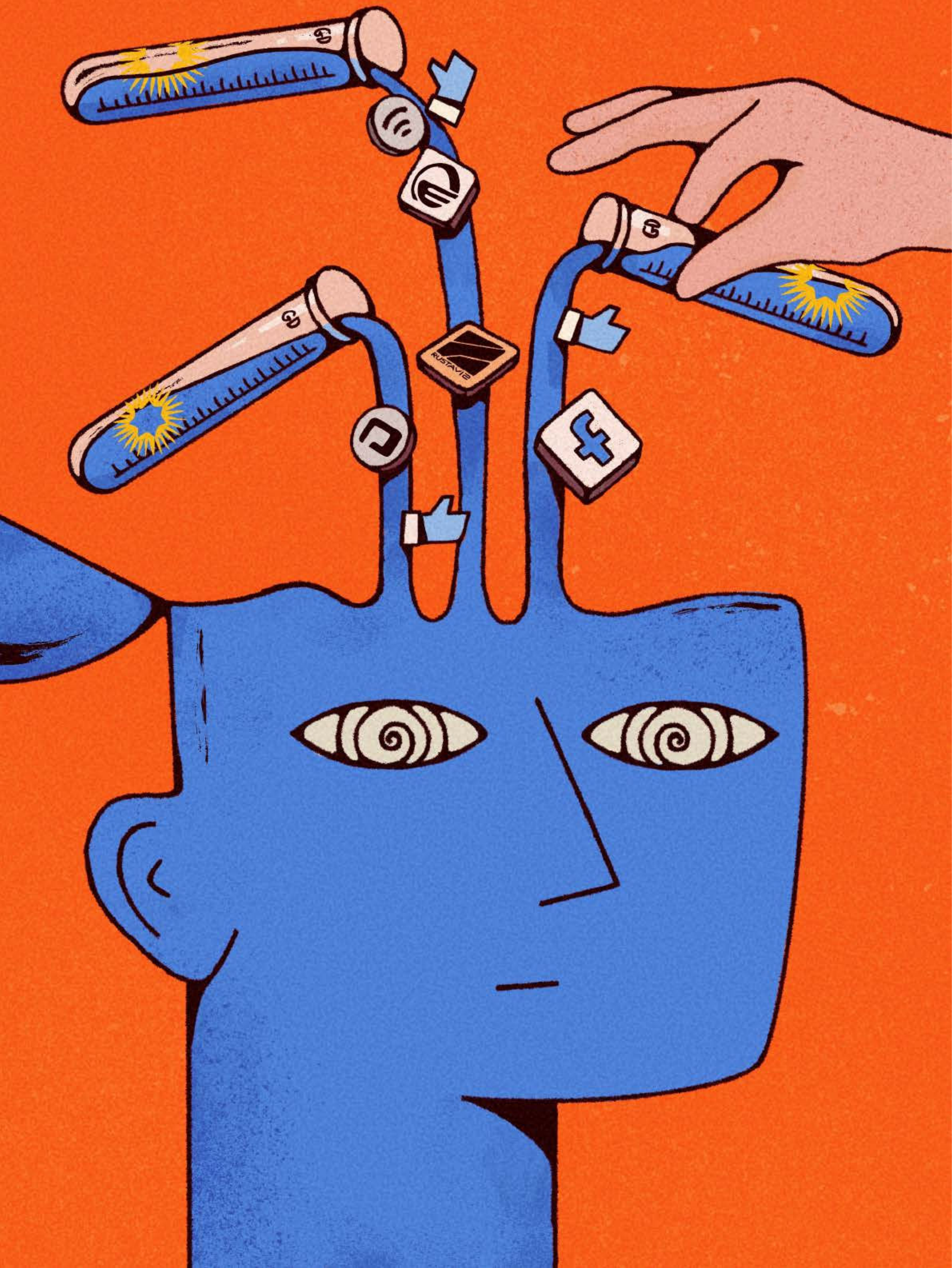
Georgia, identified nine new priorities as preconditions for Georgia’s further progress on the accession track. One of these conditions includes the “fight disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference against the EU and its values.”

The EU, the US, and the UK have all invested heavily in fighting disinformation in Georgia, also because Georgia neighbors Russia, a major source of foreign information manipulation interventions. Assistance given to local civil society actors and the government’s strategic communications department tells a strikingly different story of how the government and the local community are on different pages. While NGOs have successfully [uncovered](#) a number of information manipulation strategies and countered anti-Western propaganda, the Stratcom departments were [implicated](#) by Meta in actually distributing fake news and supporting the Georgian Dream’s pro-Russian propaganda. Since then, Western support for the government Stratcom has stopped.

Georgian Dream Propaganda Tools

The Georgian Dream invested heavily throughout the last ten years to gain control over media outlets and shape public opinion.

The Georgian Dream’s propaganda is driven by the Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, and PostTV television and social media channels, as well as hundreds of fake news websites, FB pages,



and trolls employed to portray a favorable image of the party and an enemy image of all those who are critical of the Georgian Dream. Since 2019, Meta (Facebook) has [removed](#) hundreds of pages affiliated with the Georgian government for their “coordinated inauthentic behavior.” Even the government’s Stratcom pages were shut down.

The Georgian Dream invested heavily throughout the last ten years to gain control over media outlets and shape public opinion. Opposition party leaders and civil society representatives are never or seldom invited to the pro-government propaganda outlets. Moreover, the network of government media sources often orchestrates attacks on the opposition, CSOs, the critical media, and Western partners.

Pro-government commercial TV channels, like the Imedi TV company, are engaged in a massive disinformation campaign against everyone critical of the Georgian Dream. Known for its high ratings and substantial financial resources, Imedi is [observed](#) by the Charter of Journalistic Ethics to have a distinctly pro-government editorial stance, confining the journalists to a pro-Georgian Dream editorial policy. The Imedi TV conglomerate encompasses Imedi TV, Maestro, and GDS (Georgian Dream Studio), previously owned by Bidzina Ivanishvili’s son. During the 2018, 2020, and 2021 elections, Imedi was in an emergency broadcast mode to thwart the National Movement's return to power.

Another mouthpiece of the Georgian Dream government is the commercial Rustavi 2 TV, which changed its editorial policy from critical to pro-governmental after the 2019 change of ownership. Before that, Rustavi 2

was the main opposition channel. The legal battle for the Rustavi 2 TV company's ownership began in 2015 when a former owner linked to the Georgian Dream filed a lawsuit, and the Georgian court allowed it to take over the ownership of the TV company. Following the European Court's decision on July 18, 2019, the ownership fully changed, new management was installed, and several leading journalists were ousted. This led to a mass exodus of over 60 journalists, some joining Mtavari Arkhi TV, established by Rustavi 2's former director, Nika Gvaramia, and others moving to Formula TV, established by the former Defense Minister David Kezerashvili. Mr. Gvaramia has since then been arrested and released due to a presidential pardon, and Mr. Kezerashvili has a pending case in the Georgian court system.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), also controlled by the ruling Georgian Dream party, suffers from low ratings despite receiving a hefty sum from the state budget. In 2017, parliament [amended](#) the broadcasting law, expanding the Public Broadcaster’s powers to receive additional revenues from commercial advertising. This shrunk the advertisement market and damaged the independent critical TV media. The president vetoed the bill for these reasons, but the parliament overturned the veto.

Party control is evident in the GPB's Supervisory Board composition, which, instead of reflecting a diverse and impartial group as intended, is predominantly filled with individuals favoring the Georgian Dream. The party’s influence extends to the appointment of GPB directors who often have direct connections to the Georgian Dream, have fired critical journalists, shut down critical TV

programs, and have turned the Public Broadcaster into a tool for state propaganda.

The same pattern of government influence and control is also seen in the case of Adjara TV, a regional subsidiary of the GPB, where leadership changes and policies reflect a similar bias towards the ruling party. Election monitoring reports have consistently highlighted the bias in the GPB's coverage, especially during elections, showing a clear favoritism towards the government. Known for rarely inviting opposition leaders or critical experts to political debates or evening shows, these public broadcasters have an editorial policy heavily favoring the government.

The propaganda network of the Georgian Dream is very diverse in social media.

The propaganda network of the Georgian Dream is very diverse in social media. Hundreds of news agencies and fake accounts take up the propaganda message and efficiently transmit it to Facebook and other social media users. [According to](#) the International Society for Free and Fair Elections (ISFED), hundreds of fake news or discrediting websites, social media groups, and pages affiliated with the Georgian Dream were engaged in a coordinated discreditation and disinformation campaign from 2018 to 2021.

Why Propaganda?

How is it possible that a country that was granted the EU membership perspective in 2022 and is poised to become the newest EU candidate state in December 2023 uses the instrument of information manipulation in the best traditions of authoritarian states?

The simple answer is that the ruling Georgian Dream faces a challenge influencing voter decisions by deeds and words. As Timothy Snyder notes in his "On Tyranny," propaganda aims to arouse feelings before people can ascertain facts. The Georgian Dream's powerful disinformation machinery is in place to cure any possible maladies from their governance and persuade people before they see the government's failures. The Georgian Dream seems to have found a panacea, an all-purpose fix for its internal and external troubles – propaganda and disinformation.

There are three reasons why the Georgian Dream uses propaganda to cover its foreign and domestic policy failures. First of all, robust misinformation brings **immediate impact**. Through the vast network of private TV channels, the Georgian Public Broadcaster, social media presence, government strategic communication departments, and the active engagement of civil servants, problems that could upset society are dealt with through coordinated disinformation and propaganda.

Secondly, the Georgian Dream **maintains and adapts the narratives**, devoid of value-based content but targeted at short-term political gains. For this reason, political opponents, NGO leaders, journalists, and Western leaders have become the target of propagandistic attacks. Three major narratives dominate the Georgian Dream's message box: about the West and the "global war party" dragging Georgia into war with Russia, about the West encroaching into Georgia's domestic affairs through the network of spies and "foreign agents" and the necessity to maintain Georgian Christian

values to counter Western-imposed liberalism.

■ **Current polarized political status quo is maintained through propaganda.**

Thirdly, the **current polarized political status quo** is maintained through propaganda. Effective reforms, especially in the judiciary and anti-corruption, would require changes threatening the existing power structure of the Georgian Dream or the interests of the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Propaganda allows for maintaining the status quo without the risks associated with meaningful change. Therefore, the problems of depolarization, or deoligarchization, are easier to discard if they are portrayed as Western-imposed conditionalities that could lead Georgia into chaos if addressed.

Maximum Influence with Minimal Efforts

Reforms necessary for European integration are cumbersome and prone to endanger the one-party rule of the Georgian Dream. Moreover, fundamental reforms take time and require political will, which the Georgian Dream does not have since strengthening independent institutions is incompatible with oligarchic one-party rule. This is why the Georgian Dream withdrew from the April 19, 2021 agreement (also known as Charles Michel's document), which was focused on cooperation in the parliament, including power-sharing with the opposition.

Reluctance to limit oligarchic one-party rule is also a primary reason why the government of Georgia left important preconditions imposed by the EU unfulfilled, such as deoligarchization, depolarization (including pow-

er-sharing), judiciary reform, the fight against corruption, strengthening the oversight of law enforcement agencies and securing the independence of the state institutions.

According to the coalition of Georgian NGOs, which [issued](#) six reports monitoring the implementation of the 12 conditionalities, only three EU priorities were implemented. Electoral and institutional reforms, judiciary reforms, anti-corruption measures, and the fight against organized crime were assessed as partially fulfilled, while the depolarization and deoligarchization conditions were assessed as unfulfilled.

The European Commission's assessment was similar, also considering only three recommendations as being fulfilled. For the new nine conditionalities, the Commission rolled over the unfulfilled priorities and added new items essential for the independence of institutions and the country's successful advancement on the Europeanization path. New conditions include not just judiciary and electoral reforms but also the independence of the prosecution, oversight of the State Security Service, a fundamental reform of the High Council of Justice, and the assurance of the autonomy of the Central Bank. These heavy institutional requirements are coupled with the rolled-over recommendations of depolarization and deoligarchization and a new demand to show a solid "track record" in investigating corruption cases.

However, despite these slow reforms and the continuous criticism of the government from Western partners, civil society, and opposition parties, the Georgian Dream's propaganda machine maintained public support

through vicious attacks and negative smear campaigns against political opponents, shifting the discussion from failed reforms to the enemy image of their political opponents wanting to bring Georgia into Russia's war and the Georgian Dream being a guarantor of peace.

Building an Enemy Image to Stay in Power

When Russia faced sanctions from Western nations, the Georgian Dream party used propaganda to argue that joining the sanctions would have led to Russian aggression against Georgia. The party also interpreted the European Union's call for systemic reforms, a prerequisite for EU candidacy, as pressure to provoke Russia. When the United States imposed sanctions on Georgian officials for corruption, the Georgian Dream remained steadfast, asserting that these measures were an attempt to involve Georgia in a conflict with Russia and open a "second front." After Georgia was not granted EU candidate status in 2022, the ruling party's propaganda machine argued that the EU wanted Georgia to start a war with Russia, and when it refused, it punished it by not granting it candidate status.

In September, Georgia's State Security Service initiated a probe into an alleged coup attempt, criticizing USAID for supposedly funding training for revolutionary activities in a hotel meeting room. Investigations like these, often shrouded in secrecy as [revealed](#) by FactCheck Georgia, have historically been employed as tools before elections. Despite no arrests, these claims served as potent propaganda pieces. Recently, ultra-right factions connected to the Georgian Dream initi-

ated the anti-Maidan movement, vowing to oppose street demonstrators against the government. These actions align the Georgian Dream with regimes like Milosevic and Yanukovich. However, powerful propaganda aids in framing these actions within a war versus peace narrative, overshadowing such inconsistencies.

A recent [report](#) by Publika, based on the analysis of Imedi TV news, highlighted the sophistication of the Georgian Dream's propaganda efforts. Party leaders tailor their messages to different audiences. While the Prime Minister adopts a more conciliatory tone toward US and EU leaders, the party chairman takes an aggressive stance, and the Tbilisi mayor frequently emphasizes the importance of peace. The Georgian Dream consistently blames the opposition and civil society for attempting to drag Georgia into the war and undermine the country's European integration aspirations. With this propaganda, the Georgian Dream covers up its disconnection from European-minded Georgians and failure to deliver on the reforms requested by the EU.

The central thrust of the Georgian Dream's propaganda is the portrayal of all NGOs as "wealthy" and foreign spies, a trick straight out of Russia's playbook. Former US Ambassador Kelly Degnan has often been depicted as the puppet master orchestrating opposition parties and NGOs against the government. Attacks on civil society organizations climaxed in March 2023 when the Georgian Dream attempted to pass a law on foreign agents (read spies). The party eventually backtracked due to public backlash and civil protests, but this did not deter them from continuing their attacks on NGOs. The Geor-

gian Dream's leaders publicly stated that the main goal of portraying Georgian civil society as foreign spies was achieved.

The Georgian Dream also employs disinformation and propaganda to present itself as an anti-liberal force, depicting the liberal West as an enemy.

The Georgian Dream also employs disinformation and propaganda to present itself as an anti-liberal force, depicting the liberal West as an enemy. Liberalism has become a derogatory term under the Georgian Dream, consistently taking a tough stance on LGBTQI+ rights, framing it as "gay propaganda." Just recently, Georgia's Prime Minister signed a memorandum of cooperation with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban in the "field of the family," no matter how bizarre this sounds. The Georgian Dream's expulsion from the Party of European Socialists for embracing anti-liberal policies was also justified by the propaganda machine as a retaliation against the defense of conservative family values from the liberal European encroachment.

Maintaining a Polarized Status Quo

The European Union has been demanding that the Georgian Dream depolarize society. The first priority among the 12 conditions set forth in 2022 was depolarization. Depolarization is also key in the nine conditions the Commission imposed on Tbilisi in November 2023. However, the polarization of Georgian society is different from what a classic understanding of this term would imply – a horizontal, equally powerful two poles fighting a political battle, leaving no space for other political actors. As wittily [noted](#) by Hans Gut-

brod, in Georgia's case, a more adequate description of polarization would be "vicious refeudalization." Indeed, it is hard to talk about two poles if the government uses security services to oppress political opponents, arrests free media managers, keeps former government officials and a former president imprisoned, fully controls the courts and the prosecution, and uses the vast resources of the oligarch to buy votes well in advance of the elections.

The Georgian Dream needs to maintain a highly polarized society to keep its power in the 2024 parliamentary elections.

The Georgian Dream needs to maintain a highly polarized society to keep its power in the 2024 parliamentary elections. Therefore, the European Union's depolarization condition starkly contrasts with the Georgian Dream's political interest to maintain power at all costs. The 2024 parliamentary elections will be fully proportional with a 5% electoral threshold in which pre-election blocs and alliances among the parties are prohibited. Therefore, it is in the interest of the Georgian Dream to portray the distorted reality as if the only alternative to its rule is the return of the UNM and Saakashvili. And this is where propaganda comes in handy.

This strategy implies spreading disinformation that no other parties, except for the UNM, matter as they are the stooges of the UNM and are just pretending to be in the opposition. Denial of party identity for smaller parties is a major contributing factor to the polarization of society.

This simplistic picture disregards a Georgian voter's wide variety of choices beyond the

UNM, ranging from right-leaning classical liberal European Georgia to the libertarian right Girchi and Droa to center liberal Lelo and a few left parties such as Labor and the Citizens. The choice also includes the former Georgian Dream Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's For Georgia party, whose success in clearing the 5% threshold would be the biggest hit for the Georgian Dream as Gakharia garners his supporters from the Georgian Dream's camp.

Achieving the goal of maintaining a polarized Georgian society can only be achieved through the massive propaganda campaign, which is aimed at portraying the whole opposition as "radical" and "warmongering."

What Can the West Do?

Anti-Western propaganda also undermines Georgia's European aspirations and erodes public support for EU and NATO membership.

As the 2024 parliamentary elections draw near, the West should be worried about the drastic rise of propaganda and disinformation in the best Russian traditions. While the Georgian Dream may enhance its party image through these tactics, it undermines societal resilience and cohesiveness through radicalizing polarizing rhetoric and smear campaigns. Anti-Western propaganda also undermines Georgia's European aspirations and erodes public support for EU and NATO membership. Lastly, the Georgian Dream's propaganda creates fertile ground for Russia's Foreign Information Manipulation Interferences (FIMI).

If the Georgian Dream manages to win the 2024 elections with rampant anti-Western

rhetoric and propaganda, it will mark an unprecedented shift in Georgia's political landscape as, for the first time, Georgia will have a government that had run and won on the anti-Western platform. Such an outcome would jeopardize not only the Georgian people's interests but also the West's strategic interests in the wider region.

The European Union and the United States, nonetheless, still possess instruments to curb the Georgian Dream's anti-Western propaganda. The first step in this direction has already been taken by introducing the condition of a fight against disinformation in the EU conditions. The EU and the US have already pledged funds to fight disinformation in Georgia. However, the next four steps are just as important.

First, the European Union must regularly follow up on the status of implementing the anti-disinformation condition. The ruling party will most likely attempt to window-dress this condition's implementation by adopting an action plan and creating documents and frameworks of action. However, the essence of propaganda is in the machinery that the Georgian Dream has created. The EU must insist that the party-led media must become open for political debates and stop coordinated anti-Western attacks.

Second, the European Union should follow the United States and consider sanctioning those individuals, including the propaganda chiefs of the Georgian Dream, who are spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda and contributing to the strengthening of the Russian positions in Georgia. In September 2023, the US State Department [imposed](#) sanctions on the

former Prosecutor General of Georgia, Otar Partskhaladze, for his actions “to influence Georgian society and politics for the benefit of Russia.” The EU could do the same. If not collectively, then concrete EU Member States can introduce travel sanctions for the Georgian propagandists. This could be the most serious deterrent for continuing anti-Western propaganda.

Thirdly, the EU must support independent media in Georgia. The best medicine against propaganda is having a plurality of strong voices heard through various TV and online media sources. The Georgian media landscape is diverse but has been weakened by the Georgian Dream. Court cases against media managers and journalists and attacks against civil society weaken the social fabric, which could resist propaganda and disinformation.

And finally, the EU must stop giving credit to

the Georgian Dream for promising to deliver on the reforms and actually demand their implementation. Recommending (and hopefully granting) candidate status to Georgia was a geopolitical act that allowed Tbilisi to move to the next stage. However, the Georgian Dream must now receive the clear message that the EU would not cut them slack anymore. ■

Turning the Irony of History into a Big Success for Georgia

Why the EU Should Make Geopolitical Enlargement Transformative

Charlie Chaplin once said that the irony of life was doing wrong things at the right moment or doing right things at the wrong moment. It is hard not to see the irony that the EU wants to speed up Georgia's European integration now when the least pro-European Georgian Dream (GD) government since Georgia's independence is in power. The previous highly pro-European United National Movement (UNM) government (2004-2012) never saw such enthusiasm regarding its aspiration to join the EU.

European Commission recommended offering candidate status “with conditions to be met” to the government that calls the EU “unfair,” “oppressive,” and accuses the Europeans of trying to drag Tbilisi into the war with Russia.

On November 8, 2023, the European Commission recommended offering candidate status “with conditions to be met” to the government that calls the EU “unfair,” “oppressive,” and accuses the Europeans of trying to drag Tbilisi into the war with Russia. Just 15 years ago, many European diplomats and politicians could not hide, at best, their amusement and, at worst, their annoyance at seeing European flags hoisted on all Georgian public buildings by the decision of the UNM government: “You are not an EU member, and you will not get there anytime soon” was the most common reaction at the time.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the topic of EU enlargement reemerged on the policy agenda in Brussels and among the member states. The opening of the membership path for the Eastern Trio (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) and beyond (several Western Balkan candidacies are simmering again, and some have started dreaming about bringing Armenia in shortly) is Ukraine-driven. It is both Russia's extreme revisionism and the Ukrainian armed forces' heroic resistance that created the momentum that the EU cannot ignore. There is now a “strategic need” for enlargement, and no other choice exists. In this, the new wave of enlargement will differ from the previous ones, driven by the opportunity created by the collapse of communism and the positive agenda of uniting the European continent under freedom and democracy banners. In the current historical context, Brussels and other European capitals understand that the cost of non-enlargement is more significant than that of enlargement.

Georgia's good fortune is to be caught by Brussels on the right side of the new dividing lines. With Russia and the new camp of authoritarian states on one side and Ukraine and the West on the other, the EU perceives Georgia to be on the right side because of the strong Europhilia of Georgia's population, despite the markedly Eurosceptic, not to say Europhobic, tendencies of its government.



EU



2003



2009



2021



2022



This decision, however, raises many questions. Is granting Georgia candidate status in these circumstances a good choice? Will it have positive medium- or long-term consequences for Georgia and the EU? What can be done to avoid making the same past mistakes? How can the negative scenarios that have characterized older candidate countries (e.g., Serbia and Turkey) be avoided? How should the increasing Russian influence be countered and the subsequent decline of popular support for EU membership be avoided? How can the enlargement process stop the slide toward authoritarianism without substantial reforms?

EU-Georgia Relations under UNM and GD: A Swinging “je t'aime, moi non plus”

■ For Georgia, the EU is almost unconditional love.

For Georgia, the EU is almost unconditional love. The desire for Europe, especially among the cultural and intellectual elites, predates the country's independence, even if the fascination with Europe is more recent for ordinary Georgians and probably follows other imperatives than sharing the same values. An analysis of the roots and causes of the Georgian population's Europhilia is not the purpose of this piece. Still, it is a decisive factor worth considering.

The EU's response to this almost blind and unconditional love depended on which phase the Georgia-EU relations were in. Before the November 2002 Rose Revolution, Georgia and the entire Caucasus region were seen as, above all, a potential source of such problems as ethnic conflicts, crime, and refugees. The reforms of the Rose Revolution in Georgia

sparked increased European interest in Georgia during the 2000s. However, Georgia was still considered just a neighbor with no immediate prospects of joining the “European club.” The Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, marking Moscow's first military foray beyond its borders since Afghanistan, significantly altered European geopolitical perceptions, highlighting Russia as a rising threat to the continent. The war's impact on geopolitical dynamics led to the creation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, officially launched in 2009.

With the EaP, Georgia had the chance to negotiate the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. As is often the case in EU policies, an assumed ambiguity and operational misunderstandings emerged. While most Western and Southern European members thought the AA was a tool to avoid any eventuality of enlargement, the pro-enlargement “usual suspects” (Poland, Baltics) along with the Eastern European states signatories to the AA (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia), considered these treaties as a first step towards future enlargement, even if the prospects for this future enlargement seemed ambiguous and distant at the time.

Following Chaplin's definition of irony, the problem with the AA, the DCFTA, and the visa liberalization agreements was that their conclusion occurred during the period of “enlargement fatigue.” In the 2010s, most Western Balkan countries received candidate status, and some even started negotiating membership (Montenegro, Serbia). Still, within the EU, the time for enlargement was not yet ripe. Many thought that the EU had not digested the enlargements of the 2000s

and that institutional functioning was becoming more complicated with 27 or 28 members. Fears of uncontrolled enlargement took precedence over geopolitical ambition, and the approach became minimalistic.

Thus, in the final stretch of negotiations on the AA text between the EU and Georgia, a fierce battle took place over the evocation of the European perspective in the treaty preamble. Substantial resistance to anything that could have even remotely given the hope of enlargement came from the major capitals (Berlin, Paris). Several rounds of negotiations on each comma resulted in a rather vague formulation about “political association and economic integration,” acknowledging “the European aspirations and European choice of Georgia” and recognizing that Georgia was an “Eastern European country.”

With the entry into force of the AA, the DCFTA, and visa liberalization, the relations of Brussels with its Eastern partners followed a period of creativity breakdown. Enlargement was often portrayed as the root of numerous problems in many member states, with politicians frequently presenting it as a convenient scapegoat for various issues.

Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Georgian billionaire with Russian connections, and his Georgian Dream party came to power amidst this context. Unlike the previous ruling party, which started to annoy many European leaders with its overflowing activism and the strong desire to accelerate European integration, the “temperance” of the new ruling party and its “middle” position between the West and Russia found a positive echo in Europe, too tired of enlargement and eager to find a last-ing *modus vivendi* with Moscow.

The first foreign policy statements of Ivanishvili about the non-existence of threats from Russia (“I don't believe that Russia's strategy is to occupy its neighbors' territories”) and the fascination with Armenia's foreign policy positioning (“Armenia's policy towards NATO and Russia is a good example for Georgia”) were not considered as particularly problematic by the Europeans at that time.

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and even shortly after, the enlargement file remained politically frozen. The EU calmly followed a bureaucratic enlargement routine by emphasizing the necessity to strictly comply with the spirit and letter of the membership criteria. As objectively no candidate or aspiring country met the criteria, the EU was poised to remain passive on enlargement for many years and possibly even decades.

Finally, in the spring of 2022, Ukrainian resistance and the demonstration that it could survive and even prevail against Moscow radically changed the situation. There was an apparent shift in attitude among the three European leaders (Macron, Scholtz, Draghi) following their joint visit to Kyiv in the summer of 2022. Macron recited a true profession of faith in favor of enlargement in his significant GLOBSEC Bratislava speech in Spring 2023. Thanks to the Ukrainian resistance, a traditional champion of non-enlargement, France made its *aggiornamento*.

Georgian government's lack of enthusiasm for Europe and its hesitancy to implement essential reforms are outweighed by geopolitical factors.

Within this scenario, the current Georgian

government's lack of enthusiasm for Europe and its hesitancy to implement essential reforms are outweighed by geopolitical factors. The determined spirit of the Georgian people further bolsters these considerations. The favorable recommendation by the Commission was issued despite the actions of the Georgian Dream government rather than because of them.

How to avoid a post-candidate status failure?

Was the Commission right to give a positive recommendation to Georgia's candidate status in November 2023 when its government did not deserve it and adopted a series of measures that knowingly went against the recommendations? Is it wise to continue the path of enlargement with a Georgian Dream taking up the “pinnacles” of Russian propaganda on the war in Ukraine, the “moral decay of Europe,” and its “crisis of values?” Should Brussels reward a government that seeks candidate status solely for internal political use and has no real intention of adopting reforms, as the latter would directly threaten its monopoly on political power, its domination in media, and its control of the judiciary? Is the EU not making the same mistake as in the case of Serbia, a candidate country since 2012 and in membership negotiations since 2015, but in apparent decline in terms of compliance with EU criteria of democracy, the rule of law, the fight against corruption and the alignment with EU foreign policy decisions?

The subject of EU enlargement can be viewed through two prisms: geopolitical and transformational.

The subject of EU enlargement can be viewed

through two prisms: geopolitical and transformational. That is to say, either enlargement happens because there is a geopolitical imperative or because the aspiring state has successfully transformed its political, economic, and social systems, adopted the values of the EU, and led a foreign policy compatible with that of the Union. The new wave of enlargement is geopolitical, which is very good news. Without geopolitics, Georgia's accession to the EU would be impossible in the visible future. But this geopolitical/transformational dichotomy becomes irrelevant if no sign of transformation and backsliding of reforms blocks the geopolitical momentum and causes the failure of the enlargement process.

In this respect, the comparison of Georgia with Serbia can be interesting. Serbia received candidate status from the European Council in October 2012, and the first inter-governmental conference that launched the negotiations took place in January 2014. Nearly three-quarters of the 35 chapters are open, and two have been negotiated and temporarily closed. However, after more than ten years of talks, the political situation in Serbia has evolved in the wrong direction. The Serbian political system is considered a “competitive authoritarian,” meaning it is formally pluralist, but the protagonists are not equal. The main Serbian media outlets are generally close to the ruling party, and opponents have little or no access to them. Public sector employees are encouraged and even forced to vote for the ruling party. The Serbian opposition considers that the elections in the country are unwinnable given the conspiracy of the ruling party's interests and economic and criminal circles. Freedom House believes that Serbia is no longer a de-

mocracy but a “hybrid regime.” A law aimed at restricting the activities of NGOs and the independent media was adopted in July 2020. In addition, the country is developing solid relations with forces hostile to Europe, notably with Putin's Russia, and has signed free trade agreements with China, agreements which the EU considers to be difficult to reconcile with the economic integration of Serbia with the EU. Those who know Georgia will see many similarities.

Serbia does not follow the EU's sanctions on Russia and, conversely, de facto participates in circumventing them. Its alignment rate with EU foreign policy is under 50 % (the same indicator is above 90% in the case of Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania) even though the country is the largest recipient of EU funds.

Serbian experience can help us understand the risks for Georgia. Letting go of reforms and refusing the transformative aspect of the accession process will ultimately cause the strengthening of authoritarianism and establishing an illiberal regime that will eventually move the country away from, and not closer to, Europe.

The illiberal regime's priority is power conservation, so this imperative is incompatible with European integration. On the contrary, the latter becomes the main threat, and consequently, the regime is obliged to attack Europe and its values through propaganda tools, thus undermining public support for the EU. This is the final stage of the process, where the circle is complete. According to the latest polls, only around 20% of Serbs view the EU positively, and only a third of the population favor joining the Union. In a way,

Serbia is following the path already taken by Turkey, the oldest candidate and neighbor to have started accession negotiations. Once very favorably disposed towards the EU, with a majority of the population fervently in favor of membership (still 46-48% in the 2000s), Turkey today seems the furthest from the EU in the history of relations between Brussels and Ankara. Many even believe that the process is beyond repair and dead.

Once again, Serbia's and Turkey's paths contain many specificities. For example, Islam and European states' skepticism towards Turkey are non-negligible factors. The same applies to a violent confrontation in the 1990s between Serbia and NATO, of which most EU states are also members.

The Serbian and Turkish examples should put the EU on alert with Georgia, which was off to a perfect start, but its illiberal and authoritarian turn is jeopardizing its membership bid.

The Serbian and Turkish examples should put the EU on alert with Georgia, which was off to a perfect start, but its illiberal and authoritarian turn is jeopardizing its membership bid. Georgia is yet to arrive there, though. Even if the current leadership in Tbilisi is at least as illiberal and undemocratic as in Belgrade, the critical asset of the Georgian candidacy is its public opinion, which, despite the anti-EU propaganda often disseminated by the pro-government media, remains firmly anchored in favor of the EU. This temporary asset may progressively disappear if the government keeps methodically destroying the foundations of pro-EU

feelings among citizens.

The recommendation by the Commission to grant Georgia candidate status for membership, which is anticipated to be finalized by the European Council in December, represents a positive step. If the EU strategically positions Georgia on the favorable side of the emerging geopolitical divide despite its “different geography,” such a move should be met with resounding approval. However, the EU must maintain a transformational approach to its enlargement policy, ensuring that stringent conditions are upheld. Providing unconditional support to a government that desires the status of a candidate without a commitment to European values could lead to severe repercussions.

The Commission's evaluation has highlighted the importance of engaging Georgian civil society and the political opposition. The EU has set a clear expectation that candidate status for Georgia is contingent upon meeting specific conditions and beginning or completing significant reforms. EU messages are loud and clear: the government's strategy of deflecting blame onto Brussels for infringing upon national sovereignty is unlikely to find traction with public opinion. Conversely, vagueness in communication allows the government to point fingers at the EU, the opposition, and civil society for hindering the process of European integration. By conveying explicit messages and delineating responsibilities, the Georgian Dream could alienate its pro-European voter base, which is substantial. If European institutions precisely attribute the accountability for integration setbacks, the fear of losing the pro-European segment of Georgian Dream supporters, including civil servants, could pressure the

party's leaders.

Conclusion

Three main elements stand out when examining the factors affecting the EU's decision to enlarge. Geopolitical considerations often take precedence, followed by the level of public support and the extent to which a country aligns with the EU's Copenhagen Criteria, encompassing democratic principles, the rule of law, a functioning market economy, and adherence to EU laws and regulations. This alignment is also regarded as a transformative factor, with geopolitics frequently being the primary catalyst for expansion. However, a notable gap exists between the rhetoric surrounding “geopolitical enlargement” and the reform efforts, especially in Georgia's case.

The experience of EU-Georgia relations illustrates that a pro-European stance and a desire for transformation through reforms are insufficient for rapid progression toward EU membership without a strong geopolitical drive. Currently, Georgia lags behind its Eastern European counterparts in its enthusiasm for the EU, but this does not rule out its candidacy. The EU may relax its criteria when geopolitical needs, backed by public support, call for it.

The Georgian government may exploit its candidate status and the negotiation process to entrench its power rather than genuinely integrate with the EU.

Nonetheless, there are inherent dangers in offering commitments to an essentially Eurosceptic government. If the EU does not adhere to strict conditionalities and a trans-

parent dialogue about responsibilities for a failure to meet objectives, the Georgian government may exploit its candidate status and the negotiation process to entrench its power rather than genuinely integrate with the EU. This could lead to establishing an illiberal regime, jeopardizing the country's EU membership prospects. The EU has the financial and administrative means to further the enlargement's transformative goals and, if faced with resistance from the national authorities, bolster society and ensure transparent electoral processes, particularly looking ahead to the pivotal 2024 elections.

It does not matter if some good things occur in the form of the irony of history; the most important thing is to seize the opportunity and achieve profoundly positive societal changes. After all, according to Emile Cioran, the “history of the whole of mankind is irony on the move” ■

Impact of EU Policies on Georgia's Choices

Small countries in complex contested environments, such as the Eastern Partnership region, face a fundamental choice between various spheres of influence. On the one hand, the West, in general, and the EU, in particular, and, on the other hand, Russia, are competing to promote their inherently contradictory values and interests in the region. While the EU invests in developing stable and prosperous democracies in its periphery, Russia wages hybrid warfare to weaken and undermine the development and security of its neighbors. Both influence their shared neighborhood through their peculiar ways and means. Thereby, the foreign policy choices of the Eastern Partnership states are guided by how they perceive the balance between the risks and the opportunities of aligning their interests with the policies and visions of the competing actors. Georgia is no exception.

European Democracy and Prosperity vs. Russian Instability and Conflicts

To understand the policies and choices of Georgian society and the political elites throughout the last 30 years, the juxtaposition of Russian and Western (read European and American) hard and soft power projections could help understand the rationale of Georgia's foreign policymaking. For the purpose of this exercise, Georgia-EU relations will be divided into four qualitatively different stages – (1) cooperation under the Part-

nership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) from 1996 to 2009, (2) the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative from 2009 to 2014, (3) the Association Agreement (AA) agenda from 2014 until 2022 and (4) the enlargement path from 2022 until today.

In the first stage, when Georgia's statehood was still in the embryonic phase, the objective of the EU was to lead Georgia toward respecting the principles and provisions contained in the Helsinki Final Act and fundamental OSCE documents. The primary modus of the PCA was to support Georgia's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity while helping it build political and economic systems based on democratic principles. On the other hand, Russia was the main source of instability in Georgia during that period. Russia's total control over the conflicts in Georgia's Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions was the main limiting factor for Georgia's state-building opportunities. Georgia's economy also depended on Russia, which often used this leverage to exert political pressure on Tbilisi. Russia enjoyed total comfort in achieving its objectives in Georgia at that time. However, Russia quickly lost influence in Georgia after the 2003 Rose Revolution because of accelerated Western-oriented reforms. This was also when the European Union created the European Neighborhood Policy, offering Georgia the "stake" in the internal market and prospects of good neighborly relations. As Georgia quickly implemented the democratic reforms and Eu-



ropeanized its way of life and administration, European influence increased while the Kremlin's decreased. The culmination of this process was the 2008 war – when Moscow used conventional military power as a last resort to ensure that Georgia did not escape its sphere of influence.

The next stage of Georgia-EU relations was forced by the EU's need to respond to Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008, introducing the new engagement concept with the six former Soviet republics (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) under the Eastern Partnership umbrella. A mixed model of multilateral and bilateral initiatives was focused on supporting democracy, the rule of law reform, and economic opportunities based on "common values and mutual interest." The EU's immediate response in the aftermath of Russia's aggression against Georgia was marked by the assistance package of EUR five billion to stabilize the Georgian economy and reconstruct war-damaged infrastructure. Also, the EU quickly decided to deploy the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) – the EU's unarmed civilian mission to monitor conflict-affected areas in Georgia. In the conflict resolution context, the relationship between the EU and Georgia in the aftermath of the 2008 war was framed by the controversial [report](#) of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (Tagliavini Commission) established by the Council of the European Union to inspect the causes of the 2008 war. The report failed to blame Russia for its aggression against Georgia openly. Such a stance gave an unfortunate context for adequately analyzing the war and justifying Russia's aggressive regional strategy; however, the EU crafted the policy of

“non-recognition and engagement” shortly after the war, which remains a conceptual basis of its policy towards Georgia's occupied regions.

Further developments in EU-Georgia relations took place in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the instigation of the conflict in Donbas, Ukraine. The signing of the AA marked a qualitatively new stage of relations between the EU and Georgia. In contrast to the PCA and the Neighborhood Policy, the AA was designed to promote Georgia's political association and economic integration into the EU, opening paths for deep and comprehensive free trade and visa liberalization agreements. By then, it had become clear that Russia had abandoned forms of civilized competition with the EU and resorted to brute force and hybrid warfare to achieve an upper hand in its neighborhood. It took the EU a long time to digest this dramatic shift in Russia's policy; therefore, the EU continued with its strategic ambiguity policies during the third period, giving enough space and stimulus for Russia's aggressive bid to dominate the region. Strategic ambiguity was also demonstrated in the failure to acknowledge the ambitions of associated members to join European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

Finally, the monumental turning point in the EU's policy towards its Eastern neighbors was once again triggered in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, opening a long-awaited membership perspective to Georgia and granting official candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine. The cooperation and integration process details for all three countries still need to be clearly defined. There are still divisions

inside the EU about when the accession talks should start with the candidate states. In November 2023, the European Commission [recommended](#) granting candidate status to Georgia and starting accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova. The EU's priorities in Georgia and the wider region stayed in the realm of implementing a "democratic and the rule of law agenda through ambitious political, judicial and anti-corruption reforms," as [stated](#) in the EU-Georgia association agenda for 2021-2027. After the unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia degenerated its leverage as a factor in the EU's decision-making process; however, through its so-called Trojan horses, such as Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban, the Kremlin still has a chance of vetoing essential decisions related to the EaP countries.

Through all four stages, the EU's priorities and general objectives outlined in the corresponding framework agreements and all other political declarations can be summarized as helping Georgia develop and consolidate its economy, democracy, and the rule of law. The EU's decisions on moving forward with cooperation or integration with the EaP countries never preceded but followed Russia's aggressive actions. Russia indirectly influenced EU decisions regarding the EaP countries throughout these four stages. While the EU's policies exclusively aimed at assisting Georgia with economic and democratic development through soft initiatives, conditional assistance, and a push for reforms, Russia used a combination of soft and hard power, establishing hotspots of insecurity and grey zones in its neighborhood, which were then used as leverages, albeit not always successfully.

Conditionality vs. Coercion

The EU's support for Georgia has been focused on helping Georgia implement its objectives and [priorities](#) based on the conditionality principle, meaning that the EU [sets](#) certain value-based conditions for the partnership and requests that the partners follow them, in return offering them closer political, people-to-people and economic association. The EU-Georgia Association Agenda clearly [states](#) that the "EU's assistance is bound to jointly agreed strict conditionalities related to the progress on reform." According to the [Constitution of Georgia](#) and confirmed in all conceptual [documents](#) related to foreign and security policy, integration into the European Union is one of Georgia's top national priorities. Article 78 of the Constitution reads that "the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization." EU-Georgia relations are driven mainly by the shared interest in strengthening democracy, the economy, and the rule of law – the priorities also outlined in the preamble of the Georgian constitution. Therefore, it is unsurprising that through all stages of EU-Georgia relations, democratic reforms were always the primary condition and critical determinant of the partnership agenda.

To assess the effectiveness of the EU's policies on Georgia's choices, it is essential to analyze the historical and cultural context in which Georgia's national identity has been taking shape. Due to the numerous invasions and occupations by different regional superpowers, the protection of freedoms and liberties has been historically the defining value

for Georgian society. The value-based civilizational choices drove Georgians to seek independence from the USSR, join the Council of Europe (CoE), and Europeanize many economic and public administration sectors. The Western choices and aspirations of the Georgian people were consistently visible in various public opinion surveys conducted by reputable international agencies. A recent [survey](#) published by the International Republican Institute in April 2023 and all other previous studies of a similar nature showed that around 90% of Georgians are interested in European integration. According to the same study, the EU is primarily associated with economic development and a general improvement in the standard of living, protection of freedoms, and security for most Georgians.

The strongly pronounced will of society was the scene-setter for the foreign policy agenda for the consecutive governments of Georgia since regaining independence. Various governments at different times had fluctuating success in rapprochement with the EU; however, the declared policy has always been unequivocally pro-European.

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cooling of relations between Georgia and the EU. Strains have been especially obvious since the Georgian government failed to support Ukraine and its Western allies after Russia launched its war of aggression in 2022, despite the population's strong solidarity towards the Ukrainian cause. It became evident that Georgia's foreign policy moved away from the solid pro-Western course for the first time, and the foreign policy choice of the political elites contradicted public preferences.

Evolution of the Georgian Dream's Foreign Policy

There have been three stages in the evolution of the Georgian Dream's foreign policy leading to the current anti-European policy, which has been in effect since 2022.

Compromising on the strategic national interests of Georgia for the sake of not irritating Russia culminated in terminating the development of a US-supported deep-sea port project in Anaklia.

Since 2012, after the Georgian Dream's electoral victory, Georgia's pro-western foreign policy has taken a more balanced turn. The official narrative was that Georgia was pursuing European and Euro-Atlantic integration parallel to normalizing relations with Russia. This was the turning point in Georgia's foreign policy thinking. If before seeking refuge in European and Euro-Atlantic structures was the only possible alternative for mitigating the risk of Russia's aggression, now the newly elected government proposed to bandwagon the Russian threat. Over time, Georgian Dream narratives on NATO integration started to fade alongside a visible

slowdown in NATO-Georgia relations. Compromising on the strategic national interests of Georgia for the sake of not irritating Russia culminated in terminating the development of a US-supported deep-sea port project in Anaklia. Russia was particularly hostile to Georgia's active partnership with NATO and the US. Thus, for the first time, Russia's coercive policies overruled the West's power of attraction in the calculation of Georgia's government. At that point, cooperation with the EU did not exhibit risks to the balance strategy, especially since the EU also encouraged normalizing relations between Georgia and Russia.

The next stage in Georgia's foreign policy change became evident after the Georgian Dream [decided to quit](#) the April 2021 [agreement](#) brokered by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, aimed at defusing a severe post-election crisis in Georgia. The first noticeable signs of the EU losing its leverage came to light when Georgia's ruling party openly started jeopardizing the credibility of the conditionality policy. For the first time, the EU refused to give the Georgian government a EUR 75 million loan as it failed to fulfill the recommendations of the Venice Commission on judiciary independence. The European Union unambiguously [noted](#) that "Georgia failed to address the condition for this macro-financial assistance sufficiently and notably, to increase independence, accountability and the quality of the judicial system."

The risk of losing its monopoly on power pushed the ruling party to confront the EU's conditionality openly.

Later on, the principles of Michel's agreement were elaborated and expanded into 12 priority areas constituting the European Commission's recommendations and conditions necessary to obtain EU candidate status. The government realized that implementing the reforms requested by the EU would inevitably lead to the proper balance of power between political actors in Georgia. The risk of losing its monopoly on power pushed the ruling party to confront the EU's conditionality openly. Fearing the outrage of the Georgian society over the foreign policy change, the Georgian Dream still maintained a pro-European narrative while openly disregarding the EU's conditions.

The third and current stage of the policy change is marked by the Georgian Dream's 'normalization' policy, accommodating Russia's interest in hampering Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Since Russia started its war of aggression in Ukraine, it became apparent that the government of Georgia failed to support Ukraine, openly confronting it and its Western allies by launching an anti-Western propaganda campaign. While failing to criticize Russia for its aggression, blaming Ukraine and its Western allies for trying to open a second front in Georgia [has become a mainstream narrative](#) for the Georgian Dream's leaders and its proxies. The narrative of the imminent necessity of avoiding war with Russia has been skillfully fused with maintaining power at all costs. Thus, besides open anti-Western rhetoric, the Georgian Dream started testing the resilience of society's support of the pro-Western course by trying to introduce Russia-friendly policies and actions. Georgia opened doors for the uncontrolled waves of Russian migrants fleeing Russia after the war

started in Ukraine. It resumed air connection with several Russian cities parallel to the Western efforts to isolate Russia. Most notably and despite grave [concerns](#), the Georgian Dream initiated a so-called law on foreign agents, primarily seen by Georgian society and Western partners as an attempt to silence civil society and further monopolize power. Although Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are in similar positions regarding formal and bureaucratic progress on reforms, failing to align its foreign policy with the EU turned Georgia from the frontrunner to the weakest link among associated members. As a result, while Ukraine and Moldova aim to start accession talks with the EU by the end of this year, Georgia still needs to get candidate status.

Strategic Approach vs. Formalities and Bureaucracy

Georgia, morphing from presumably the world's most pro-EU country into a Russia-friendly actor, is a clear example that the power of attraction and conditionality policies alone cannot influence the behavior of political elites even if the societies project solid opposition. The gradual degradation of the conditionality policy leading to the change in the foreign policy of the Georgian government was guided by the EU's failure to adjust policies to the strategic context and balance out external and internal factors.

The external context is that the room for effective democratic and economic reforms is minimal, while the Russian Federation is waging hybrid warfare and posing an existential security threat to Georgia. Internally, a key factor is the improper functioning of democratic institutions, allowing for monop-

olizing all power sources under one political group. At the same time, even the loudly pronounced majority opinion cannot make a political change due to insufficiencies of the electoral and judiciary systems.

Only a coherent EU policy addressing external and internal factors through abandoning strategic ambiguity, setting clear strategic objectives, and tackling real existential problems instead of focusing on formalities and bureaucratic procedures can deliver positive effects. The signs of such a strategic approach could be demonstrated by giving the candidate status to Georgia despite the government's disregard for conditionality while doubling down on empowering the pro-democracy civil society of Georgia and offering meaningful dialogue of existential security challenges ■

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