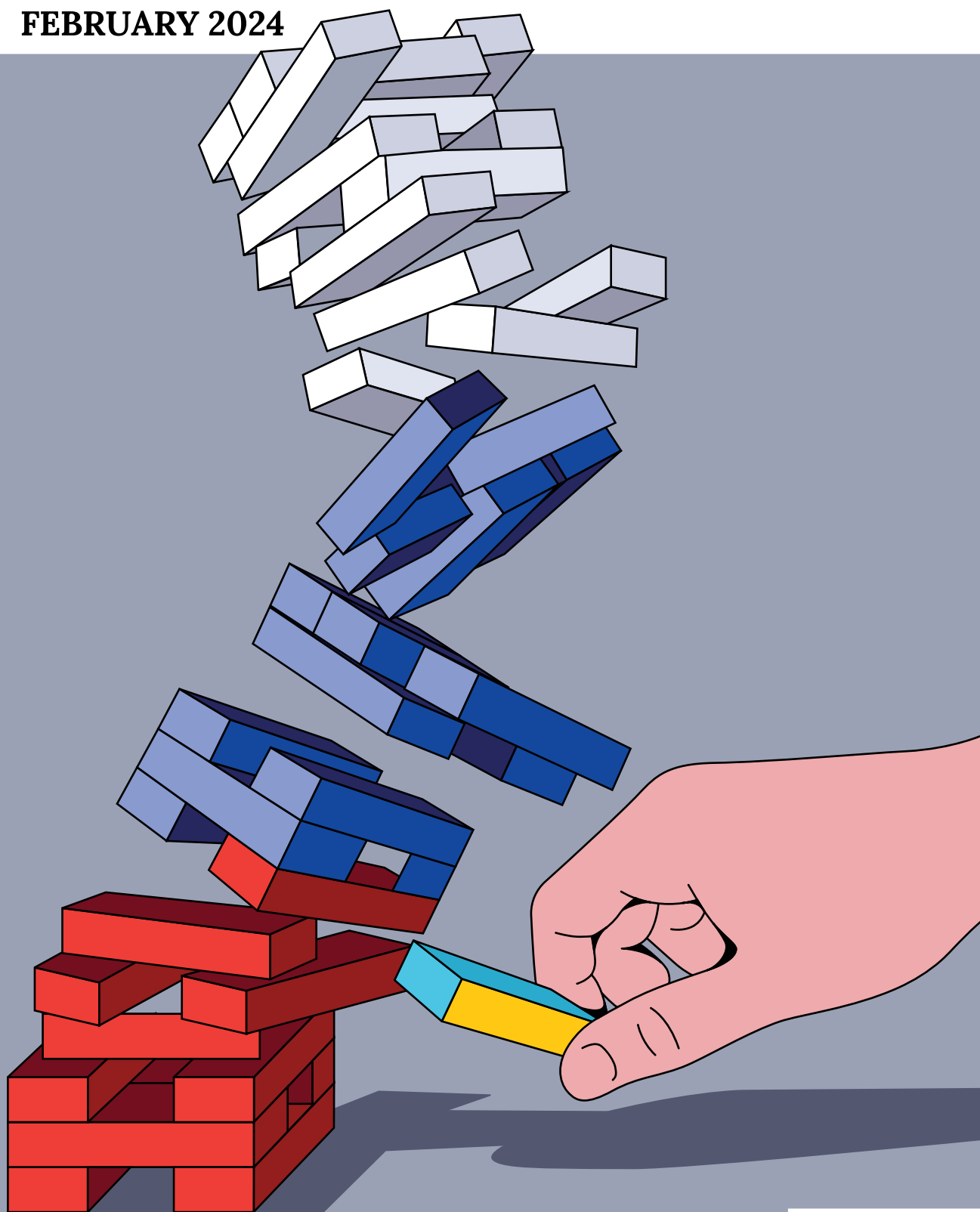


GEO POLITICS

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Our Mission

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

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

We dedicate the 3rd special edition of GEOPolitics to the unwavering struggle of the Ukrainian people against Russian aggression. We deeply admire Ukraine's resilience and yearning for freedom, appreciating their determination for ultimate victory. Unfortunately, the citizens of Georgia are all too familiar with Putin's regime's aggression, albeit on a smaller scale, as we experienced during the August 2008 war. The Georgian people stand in solidarity with Ukraine. Glory to Ukraine!

Слава Україні! Слава боротьбі українського народу за волю. Віримо у вашу перемогу та підтримуємо вас у боротьбі за свободу!



Ana Khurtsidze

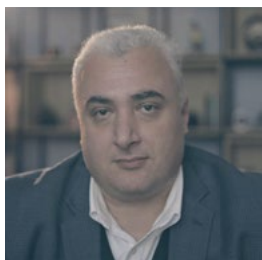
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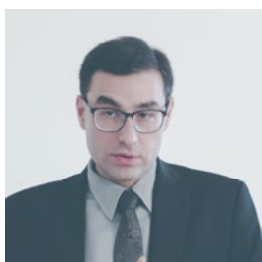
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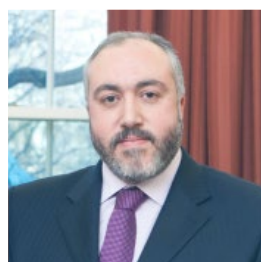
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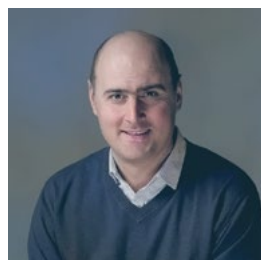
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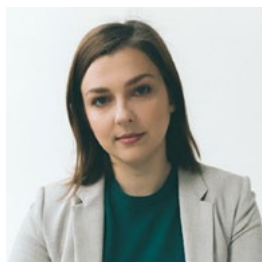
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Hugues Mingarelli

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Only Ukraine's Win Can Make the Russian Jenga Fall

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, international order has been disrupted, fully revealing Moscow's thinly veiled imperial ambitions in Europe. Ukraine's heroic resistance has prevented the Kremlin's advance, but prospects of victory remain uncertain. Western elections and internal disputes are delaying ultimate victory, emboldening Russia. Two years after Russia's atrocious act of aggression, the consolidation of the international community around the idea of "defeating Russia" is a must. Without it, European security, not just on its eastern borders, will be in danger for many years.

This collection of articles is dedicated to Ukraine, exploring various geopolitical aspects from the Georgian outlook but also from the perspective of European and Ukrainian observers. If one were to find a common leitmotiv for all pieces, it would be – "Help Ukraine Now, for Ukraine's, Europe's, and Georgia's sake."

Hugues Mingarelli contributes to this edition with an overview of Ukraine's uneasy path toward the EU and the challenges it currently faces, emphasizing the need for EU support in addressing corruption, the media, and minority rights, but above all, in assisting Ukraine to win the war. Ukraine's, as well as Moldova's and Georgia's, EU accession is seen as crucial for European security and Europe's geopolitical role.

Then, Olena Halushka steps in with the argument that Russia must pay for the harm it caused with aggression, destruction, and killing of thousands of Ukrainians. She argues that the confiscation of Russian assets is necessary to compensate Ukraine for the war-related damage. This move would align with international law and be vital for Ukraine's victory and justice and the prevention of further aggressions by rogue international actors.

Shota Gvineria explores wider Western, Ukrainian, and Russian outlooks on the current military status quo and analyzes the challenges Western nations face in responding effectively to Ukraine's war needs. He calls for greater Western coordination and support for Ukraine to achieve victory and argues that the only way lasting peace can be established in Europe is to force Russia into admitting the territorial integrity of its neighbors and refusing the spheres of exclusive influence.

Jaba Devdariani also warns against Western abandonment of Ukraine, as it could have dire geopolitical, moral, and practical consequences for European security and Eastern Partnership countries like Georgia. He emphasizes the importance of Western support for countries aligning with European values and security, undermining Russia's narrative that the West would inevitably get cold feet and is, therefore, not a credible partner to count on.

Thorniké Gordadze zooms into the deteriorating relations between Georgia and Ukraine under Georgia's current leadership. This shift is attributed to Georgia's desire to maintain a conciliatory approach toward Russia and its fears of increasing Ukrainian influence in a post-war security environment. Internal politics and the Georgian Dream's quest to maintain power at all costs also explain the fractured friendship between two former strategic allies.

Sergi Kapanadze continues the analysis of Georgia-Ukraine relations, focusing on Georgia's stance on joining the international sanctions against Russia imposed after the invasion of Ukraine. The position of the Georgian Dream could be summarized as "not joining the sanctions, but still implementing them." While Georgia's diplomatic support for Ukraine in international organizations is evident, Tbilisi's positioning on the evasion of sanctions and lack of political support for Ukraine's leadership leaves questions about Georgia's real alignment with European foreign policy.

Vano Chkhikvadze also looks at the fall-out between Georgia and Ukraine but through the prism of the challenge it provides for regional cooperation, so necessary for European integration. EU enlargement usually takes a regional dimension, and in this context, it is essential for Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova to continue positioning themselves as the Association Trio. However, strained relations between Tbilisi and Kyiv, the lack of internal coordination within the Trio, and the differences over Russia pose challenges to the viability of the Trio format.

The volume is summed up by Temuri Yakobashvili's bird's-eye view of Russia, its history, and identity formation. It is argued that the war with Ukraine and the subsequent international reaction is shifting Russian identity, politics, and economic orientation toward Asia, turning it into a "sick man of Asia" to use a historical analogy. The loss of Ukraine is transforming Russia's identity and geopolitical standing, posing a longer-term geopolitical challenge to European security with profound implications also for Georgia.

In this special edition, we honor the unwavering fight of the Ukrainian people for freedom. We are confident that Ukraine's triumph will be a triumph for the entire Western civilization and will bring peace and prosperity to Europe. Assisting Ukraine in defeating Russia would yield greater global benefits than any associated costs.

With respect,

Editorial Team

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TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI

Ukraine and the European Union: from Association to Accession

Most Ukrainians have strongly wished to see their country join the European Union for 20 years. This political choice triggered the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. Ukrainians have been waging a defensive war between 2014 and 2022, with 14,000 people killed, to support EU values and the basic principles of a rules-based international order. Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 and the heroic resistance on the part of Ukrainians to this aggression led all EU Member States, including those Western European countries that had been denying Ukraine's EU Membership perspective for 20 years, to acknowledge that Ukraine's place is in the European Union and not in Russia's sphere of influence.

Ukraine and the EU signed an Association Agreement (AA) in 2014 and started its implementation in 2017 after its ratification by all EU Member States. The AA provides the basis for political association and economic integration between the EU and Ukraine. A core component of the AA is a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which will gradually integrate the Ukrainian economy into the EU Single Market. This objective will be reached by promoting regulatory convergence - removing non-tariff barriers to trade. From 2017 to 2022, Ukraine made remarkable progress in implementing the AA, particularly in promoting the rule of law and aligning its legislation with the EU acquis in areas covered by the DCFTA. Ukraine still has to make some efforts to reap the



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Hugues Mingarelli was the EU Ambassador to Ukraine from 2016 to 2019. Previously, he was in charge of the Middle-East and North Africa at the European External Action Service between 2011 and 2016. Between 2003 and 2010, he was in charge of the countries of Eastern Europe, Russia, South Caucasus and Central Asia at the European Commission. In this capacity, he negotiated the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement. After the end of the wars in the Balkans, he was asked to set up and run the European Agency for the Reconstruction of the Balkans (1999-2002).



full potential of the DCFTA - access to the EU Single Market.

On 28 February 2022, five days after Russia launched the full-scale aggression, Ukraine presented the application for membership in the EU. In June 2022, the European Council granted Ukraine candidate status “on the understanding that” the following steps be taken:

- (1) Implement legislation on a selection procedure for judges of the Constitutional Court, including a pre-selection process in line with the Venice Commission recommendations.
- (2) Finalise integrity vetting of candidates for High Council of Justice members and the selection of candidates to establish the high qualification Commission of Judges.
- (3) Strengthen the fight against corruption, complete the appointment of a new Special Anti-corruption Prosecutor Office head, and appoint a new National Anti-corruption Bureau Director.
- (4) Ensure that anti-money laundering legislation is in compliance with the standards of the Financial Action Task Force and adopt a strategic plan for the reform of the law enforcement sector.
- (5) Implement the anti-oligarch law, taking into account the opinion of the Venice Commission.
- (6) Adopt a media law aligned with the EU

audio-visual media services directive and empower an independent media regulator.

- (7) Finalize the reform of the legal framework for national minorities and adopt an implementation mechanism.

On 2 February 2023, Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen handed over an Analytical Report on Ukraine’s Alignment with the EU Acquis to President Zelenskyy. That paper assessed the compliance of Ukraine’s legislation with the EU law in the 33 “negotiating chapters” of the EU accession process, demonstrating that in a few areas (customs services, energy, foreign policy), Ukraine’s law was harmonized, however, in most sectors, there was still a long way to go.

On 8 November 2023, the Commission issued its 2023 Enlargement package. The Commission outlined that Ukraine had made substantial progress on meeting the seven steps of the Commission’s opinion on Ukraine’s membership application and, therefore, recommended that the Council open accession negotiations with Ukraine. Faced with the loss of tens of thousands of lives, eight million refugees, six to seven million IDPs, the deportation of thousands of children to Russia and Belarus, and the massive destruction of critical infrastructures and production facilities, Ukrainian citizens and the government have shown an outstanding determination and ability to function and carry out the necessary

reforms. All observers were impressed by what Ukraine has achieved under wartime conditions.

The Commission asked Ukraine to meet four conditions by March 2024: enact a law proposed by the Ukrainian government to strengthen the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, reinforce the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption to verify assets declarations, enact a law regulating lobbying, and address the Venice Commission's recommendations on national minorities.

On 15 December 2023, the European Council decided to start accession negotiations with Ukraine. An intergovernmental conference is expected to adopt the relevant negotiating framework in March 2024. In the meantime, the Commission services are carrying out the "screening" exercise.

While recognizing the difficulty of carrying out reforms against the background of Russia's aggression, a devastated economy, and extremely difficult living conditions for a majority of Ukraine's people, it would be opportune to put in place the necessary conditions to accelerate reform efforts. In this context, it might be useful to reflect on the following issues:

- How can Ukraine's state apparatus, local authorities, and CSOs be mobilized under these very difficult circumstances?
- How to ensure that the President's Office takes the necessary steps to move

ahead (political will)?

- How to support the relevant ministries in carrying out the necessary reforms/drafting the required pieces of legislation (capacity building)?
- How to put the relevant Rada Committees (Parliament) under pressure to swiftly adopt the required new laws?

Against the background of very difficult living conditions in Ukraine, the EU should find ways to ensure that the people of this country see some concrete benefits from the EU candidate status.

Against the background of very difficult living conditions in Ukraine, the EU should find ways to ensure that the people of this country see some concrete benefits from the EU candidate status. To that end, Ukraine should be allowed to participate in some EU policies and institutions while making progress in the accession negotiations (gradual integration/staged accession process). This means step-by-step inclusion in the EU policies and funding mechanisms as a result of compliance with the EU norms and standards in such sectors as the Customs Union, Single Market, Trans-European Networks, and Digital Market. This approach would prevent Ukraine from falling into the "Balkan trap" ("Balkan trap" (endless accession negotiations without any benefit for the candidate countries' populations). Ukraine's

early participation in the Single Market and access to Cohesion Funds should be integrated into the recovery programs.

Ukraine's early participation in the Single Market and access to Cohesion Funds should be integrated into the recovery programs.

Ukraine's accession will have a strong impact on the EU policy areas, in particular, the Common Agricultural Policy and the Cohesion Policy, the EU budget, and institutional balance. The EU should undertake the necessary reforms on all of these issues as quickly as possible. To maintain the EU's capacity to act, it is imperative to review several aspects of EU governance, particularly its decision-making process – expanding the qualified majority voting to many areas currently covered by the unanimity principle. The current Belgian Presidency of the EU vowed to speed up work on these issues.

Ukraine's accession process should be closely linked to the country's reconstruction and recovery efforts. Under the accession process, Ukraine will have to align its legislation with that of the EU in six thematic clusters: fundamentals (judiciary, human rights, freedom, and security), the internal market, competitiveness and inclusive growth, the green agenda and sustainable connectivity, resources, agriculture and cohesion, external rela-

tions). This will require Ukraine to implement complex reforms in many political, economic, and social areas. These reforms must be integrated into the reconstruction and recovery programs, which are expected to promote a green, digital, and inclusive economy in line with EU standards. The Commission has proposed a dedicated "Ukraine Facility," with EUR 50 billion in grants and loans to support macro-financial stability and promote recovery over the 2024-2027 period.

The EU has changed drastically since the 2004/2007 enlargements. It no longer focuses on the Single Market and the Economic and Monetary Union. The relevant instruments will have to be mobilized to ensure that the current EU priorities (green and digital transition, management of migratory flows, security) find their right place in Ukraine's recovery programs.

Today, the EU enlargement has a different meaning than it did in 2004/2007.

Against the backdrop of the deterioration of the European security environment, today, the EU enlargement has a different meaning than it did in 2004/2007. The accession negotiation process should be less technocratic and more political. Drawing the lessons from Poland and Hungary's democratic backsliding, the EU should put more emphasis on respecting core val-

ues - the rule of law, respect for minority rights, etc. There is a need to frontload areas of geostrategic importance, like cyber resilience, fighting against disinformation, defense, and economic security.

The EU must provide “security commitments,” which will help Ukraine deter acts of aggression and resist destabilization efforts.

Russia's full-scale invasion shattered the post-Cold War security order. The EU will have to build a new security architecture on this continent, and Ukraine's fast integration into the EU security sector should be a priority. Defense-related issues should be at the forefront of accession negotiations and find their right place in the recovery programs to support the rapid ramping-up of Ukraine's weapons/ammunition manufacturing capabilities. The EU must provide “security commitments,” which will help Ukraine deter acts of aggression and resist destabilization efforts.

In view of Ukraine's success with the decentralization reform and the country's outstanding civil society, it is imperative to involve local authorities (municipalities, oblasts, hromadas), CSOs, and business representatives in the accession process and the reconstruction programs. These actors will, without any doubt, bring substantial added value to the country's modernization and its rapprochement with the EU. Their involvement will, in particular,

be indispensable for handling the effects of a fractured society and the dire demographic trajectory of the country and for strengthening the pillars of democracy.

The EU accession of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia will not undermine the EU integration process but bolster European security and strengthen its strategic dimension in an increasingly confrontational environment.

Some Member States have expressed concerns about the impact of Ukraine's accession on EU institutions, the EU budget, and policies. In view of its outstanding potential, well-educated, hardworking, and inventive people, long industrial tradition, the presence of critical raw materials, the best agricultural soil in Europe, and highly digitalized society, Ukraine will be an asset for the EU in the medium term. Thanks to its military capabilities, Ukraine should become the solid security pillar of the EU's eastern flank.

The EU accession of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia will not undermine the EU integration process but bolster European security and strengthen its strategic dimension in an increasingly confrontational environment. The new geopolitical reality makes it imperative to embed Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in the EU and thus erase any grey/buffer zone on the European continent. ■

Russia Must Pay

For nearly two years, Ukraine has been defending itself from a full-scale Russian invasion rooted in aggression that began a decade ago in February 2014. Russia is employing scorched-earth tactics on the battlefield, systematically targeting Ukrainian infrastructure, economy, energy systems, and the environment, as well as cultural heritage, education, and healthcare on a daily basis. Since February 2022, Ukrainian law enforcement agencies have launched investigations into 116,411 war crimes and 15,803 crimes against national security. Within the first year of full-scale war alone, documented damages reached a staggering [USD 411 billion](#). Calculating the exact figure at the moment is challenging, but it involves colossal losses that continue to grow as the war rages on. This is a genocidal war with the underlying Russian aim either to fully subjugate Ukraine or destroy it.

With elections looming in several of Ukraine's partner countries this year, including the US, there's a real risk of shortage or delay in aid.

Ukraine's allies promise to continue supporting Ukraine's fight against the aggressor, but the initially flawed pledge of standing with Ukraine for '[as long as it takes](#)' has transformed into '[as long as we can](#)' instead of 'whatever it takes for the victory.' With elections looming in several of Ukraine's partner countries this year, including the US, there's a real risk of shortage or delay in aid.

Meanwhile, in its budget for 2024, Russia increased defense spending by almost 70%, putting its economy on a wartime footing and preparing for years of fighting



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in the protracted war. Russia successfully bypasses sanctions, bolstering its military capabilities, and, by some estimates, now receives even more [income](#) from oil exports than before the invasion of Ukraine.

The ongoing challenges with US aid make it clear that European leaders should take the lead in building a long-term sustainable strategy in 2024 to support a decisive Ukraine victory. Important pillars of such support will be doubling down on military aid, toughening sanctions, and, crucially, implementing the long overdue confiscation of Russian assets.

Western countries froze approximately \$300 billion of the Russian Central Bank's assets.

During the first days of the full-scale war, Western countries froze approximately \$300 billion of the Russian Central Bank's assets (RCB assets). For now, these funds remain untouched. Initially, confiscating these funds was not considered, as Western powers leaned towards keeping this money immobilized till the end of the war. Since then, the horizon for freezing the assets has [morphed](#) into "until Russia pays for the damage it has caused to Ukraine." More recently, the question has evolved further: how to use this money for Ukraine at present?

Opponents of confiscation raise legal, economic, and political objections. Still,

this is clearly a political decision that cannot be answered theoretically without responding to another question: are there alternative sources to sustain long-term support for Ukraine in the protracted war that Russia is preparing for? If there are no other viable options, wouldn't a potential fall of a sovereign state to the imperialistic conquest bring more harm to the global order than confiscation of the aggressor's money? The decision should be made collectively by a coalition of G7 and EU countries.

The main legal barrier frequently named is that the confiscation would contradict the sovereign immunity of a foreign state's property. However, the language of existing international instruments directly envisages that the sovereign immunity concept relates only to court judgments and does not cover the treatment of one state's executive branch of another state.

The confiscated assets may be netted as the due payment of Russian reparations when the war ends.

More than that, the confiscation of Russian assets fully aligns with international law, constituting a legitimate countermeasure under the [2001 UN Articles](#) on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts. The freezing of RCB assets was also a countermeasure, even though it failed to stop the war. Therefore,

the measures can justly and logically be toughened and made commensurate with injuries suffered by Ukraine. In fact, even the full confiscation of USD 300 billion of RCB assets will not match the total damage inflicted on Ukraine. Furthermore, this countermeasure is reversible since Russia is obligated not only to cease the war but also to provide reparations. Consequently, the confiscated assets may be netted as the due payment of Russian reparations when the war ends.

If Ukraine lost the war, Russian aggression would become an imminent threat to EU countries and their transatlantic allies.

Confiscating Russian state assets could also be justified as a measure of collective self-defense under [Article 51](#) of the UN Charter, which recognizes the right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against the UN Member. Transferring the frozen Russian assets to Ukraine is crucial to redressing the imbalance between the Russian war machine and the Ukrainian effort to save the country and resist aggression. In the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, Russia is already [named](#) as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security.” If Ukraine lost the war, Russian aggression would become an imminent threat to EU countries and their transatlantic allies.

One of the most prominent yet false eco-

nomie arguments against confiscation is the myth that it could destroy Western financial systems by inciting major non-Western economies to diversify away from USD and Euro as reserve currencies. The fact is that there is no alternative to Western reserve currencies. According to IMF data for the second [quarter](#) of 2023, 89.2% of all reserves are held in USD, EUR, JPY, and GBP. If carried out by a joint coalition of the G7 and the EU, there is no need to worry about the risks of “de-dollarization” or “de-euroization.”

China has tried for over a decade to position the RMB (Chinese Yuan) as an alternative but failed. The main reasons are the country’s weaponization of the national currency in trade wars against the West and its inability to implement full convertibility. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine made China’s position even more vulnerable despite the expectations of some that the reserves of third countries might flock to the Chinese currency after the freezing of Russian assets. Between 2010 and 2021, investors bought a net of USD 558 billion of Chinese bonds and [sold](#) USD 115 billion from February 2022 to March 2023. Without attractive reserve assets, RMB struggles to compete, and its share in the world’s reserves as of Q2 2023 [dropped](#) to 2.4%, down from 2.8% in Q2 2022.

Gold is not a feasible option either, as it is highly volatile, with short-term volatility

[reaching](#) 15-20%. Gold has high transaction costs and lacks quick and free convertibility into other currencies.

The concluding point on the risk of authoritarian regimes diversifying reserve currencies away from G7 countries is that the primary risk event has already occurred - the immobilization of assets. If any other state intended to respond to this, they had a two-year window to take action by now.

On the contrary, the confiscation of Russian assets can send a clear message to other countries: aggressive wars should not be started. For the trust of third countries in the West not to be shaken, it is necessary to work out clear legal mechanisms with which illegal Russian aggression can be assessed. On 16 March 2022, in the [case](#) concerning Allegations of Genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Ukraine v. Russian Federation), the International Court of Justice issued an order calling on Russia to suspend military operations immediately, something which it failed to do. On 14 November 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted [Resolution](#) ES-11/5, "Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine," in which it recognized that "the Russian Federation must be held to account for any violations of international law in or against Ukraine [...]" and that it must bear the legal consequences of all of

its internationally wrongful acts, including making reparation for the injury, including any damage, caused by such acts." These legal decisions can also be used as grounds for confiscating Russian assets.

In 2014, Russia openly violated the 1994 Budapest Memorandum by attacking Ukraine, although it had an obligation to respect the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine in exchange for the latter giving up its nuclear arsenal. In the course of the war, Russia committed countless war crimes against civilians and prisoners of war. Moscow terrorized the world and Ukraine by threatening a potential nuclear disaster, weaponizing food, causing one of the world's largest environmental disasters through the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam, and making Ukraine the country most heavily contaminated by mines in the world. The gravity of Russian crimes is immense, and the bar Russia has crossed is exceptionally high.

In order to prevent confiscation from happening, the Russian government is [re-sorting](#) to its regular practice of blackmail and intimidation. Putin repeatedly established "red lines" and threats of "appropriate measures" if crossed. *Bild* journalists [highlight](#) that the West and Ukraine have already breached these lines without any effective response from Russia. Before the war, when only a select few countries provided Ukraine with light defensive weapons, Russia warned the West against

supplying weapons to Ukraine. However, Ukraine is now receiving substantial military support, including heavy weapons, long-range missiles, and modern air defense systems, and is expecting F-16 fighter jets. Russian “red lines” disappear as soon as they are crossed.

With regard to confiscation blackmail, Russia promised to take “symmetric measures” involving the confiscation of US and European assets in Russia. As is well known, Western countries do not keep their reserves in Russian banks, and so there are no substantial risks in this regard. The Russian government already began the de facto confiscation of the private assets of Western companies starting from the first days of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This decision was unrelated to the potential Western confiscation of the RCB assets. Moscow started with the restrictions on dividend payments from securities and ultimately progressed to gaining full control over market exits and asset sales, preventing their sale at fair and profitable prices. Numerous companies have fallen under the control of Putin’s allies, with some being effectively expropriated without any compensation being provided. For instance, [Fortum](#) (Finland), [Danone \(France\)](#), and [Carlsberg Group](#) (Denmark) were taken into what Russia calls “temporary management.”

The delay of aid for Ukraine’s self-defense, macroeconomic stability, and recovery can have a detrimental impact on the nation’s ability to defend itself against the imperialistic conquest.

The delay of aid for Ukraine’s self-defense, macroeconomic stability, and recovery can have a detrimental impact on the nation’s ability to defend itself against the imperialistic conquest. The occupation of more Ukrainian lands would bring much more killings, ethnic cleansing, and violence. The atrocities the world was outraged to see in Bucha in spring 2022 would multiply hundreds or thousands of times. Ukraine’s defeat would force millions of new refugees to flee from genocide, putting a cosmic burden on the EU economy. Russian victory would trigger other wars across the globe, with dictators pursuing their foreign policy goals by force. Russian victory would be the victory of the Axis of Evil. This cannot be allowed.

Sustainable peace in Europe will only be secured with Ukraine’s victory.

Sustainable peace in Europe will only be secured with Ukraine’s victory. The confiscation of Russian assets in favor of Ukraine is a viable option for not only ensuring stable funding but also for upholding justice. ■

Western Dilemma of the War of Attrition

After two years of its full-scale war against Ukraine, the Kremlin has failed to achieve most of its declared goals. Presumably, it now tries to protract the conflict to the point where Ukraine and the international community will be forced to accept the Kremlin's conditions for peace. Russia's latest actions and rhetoric do not show signs of readiness to negotiate in good faith. There are different perspectives on the prospects of peace in Russia, various Western stakeholders (NATO and EU member states), and Ukraine. Those stakeholders also have different visions and definitions of victory and defeat in this war. Those perspectives, visions, and definitions are often contradictory and mutually exclusive. Furthermore, there is insufficient clarity on the intentions and objectives of various affected parties,

leading to more misconceptions, confusion, ill-informed, and ambiguous policies.

The only way to end this war is to ensure that Russia loses in Ukraine.

Russia turned strategic competition with the West into a war against Western interests and values in its neighboring countries. The only way to end this war is to ensure that Russia loses in Ukraine. Only the defeat on the battlefield can make the Kremlin backtrack on its imperial ambitions to grab the neighbors' lands with force. The only way to lasting peace in Europe is to make Russia respect the territorial integrity of its neighbors and reject the spheres of exclusive influence.



Shota Gvineria
Contributor

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United with Ukraine

"In this time of uncertainty, we have a clear way forward: Help Ukraine defend itself. Support the Ukrainian people. Hold Russia accountable."

ANTONY J. BLINKEN
SECRETARY OF STATE

Most EU countries in favour of
expanding fund for military aid
Ukraine – Borrell

Crimea can be the only real indicator of victory and defeat in this war - whoever controls the peninsula at the end of the armed conflict can be considered the true winner.

Crimea is the decisive terrain in Russia's war against Ukraine. The notion that Crimea could be a winning price for Russia, satisfying Putin's appetite and guaranteeing the sustainable end of the conflict, is utterly wrong. On the contrary, Crimea can be the only real indicator of victory and defeat in this war - whoever controls the peninsula at the end of the armed conflict can be considered the true winner.

Russia's Endgame: Asserting Dominance Beyond Ukraine

The declared goals of Russia's full-scale invasion have remained the same after two years of war. As President Putin stated in December 2023 during his first annual [press conference](#) since the start of

the war, Russia's goals of "denazification, demilitarization and a neutral status" of Ukraine are unchanged, and there is no prospect of peace until they are achieved. Later, former president Dmitry Medvedev elaborated on the necessary conditions for achieving peace between Russia and Ukraine through his infamous [Twitter account](#). While referring to Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kyiv as temporarily occupied Russian cities, he explicitly mentioned a regime change in Ukraine as an inevitable condition for talks. Apart from Crimea, Russia formally annexed four regions of Ukraine's heartland: Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk (see Figure 1 below). From Russia's perspective and purely from the legal point of view, there is no difference in the status of the five annexed regions. Russia imposed a zero-sum game where it hopes to blackmail Ukraine and its Western allies to accept 'new realities' the same way it has been successfully imposing Crimea's annexation from 2014 to 2022.

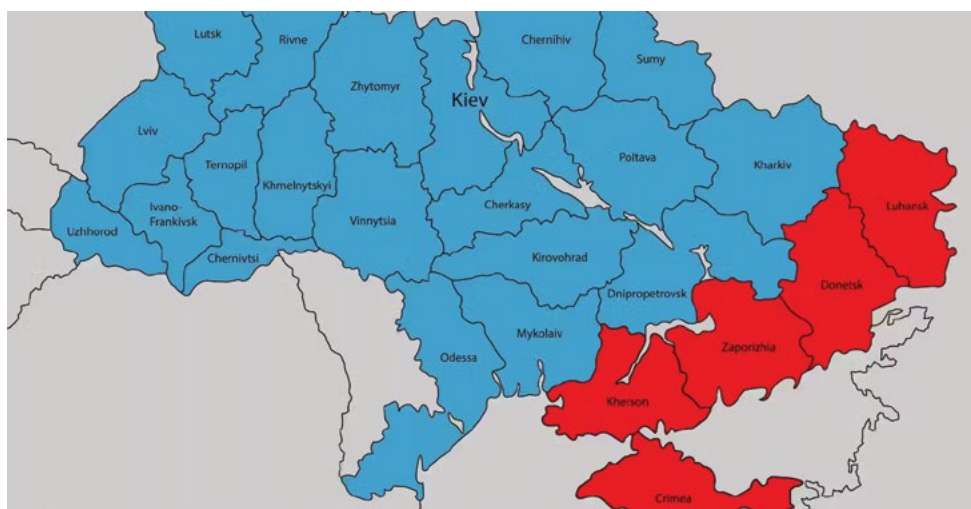


Figure 1: Russian-annexed Ukrainian Territories in Red

There is no reason to think that Russia's objectives in Ukraine could be limited to controlling Crimea or Donbas. For Moscow, the war in Ukraine has always been about its standoff with the West. In December 2021, Russia elaborated two documents clearly articulating its goals, which go beyond its operational or even strategic objectives in Ukraine. Draft agreements proposed to [Washington](#) and [NATO](#) are still available on Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official website. Both documents represent a set of ultimatums to the US and NATO requesting the so-called "security guarantees" to Russia through a new European security architecture directly legitimizing the sphere of exclusive influence in its 'Near Abroad.' Notably, Russia controlled most of Donbas at that point, and there was hardly any challenge to Crimea's status.

As the world chose to turn a blind eye to the annexation of Crimea, it inadvertently provided a signal of approval for further Russian imperialist advancements. As a result, an emboldened Russia officially requested a green light to control not only the entire Ukraine but also acknowledge its "security concern" in the entire Black Sea and Baltic regions. This is why, at this point, it is crucial to force Russia to understand that the 'new reality' it created is illegal, irrelevant, and unsustainable. Negotiating peace on the Kremlin's terms means that Russia will attempt to achieve a legitimization of the annexed and occu-

pied territories in Ukraine as the basis for any talks, inevitably leading to more tensions in both the Baltic and Black Sea regions.

The hopeful anticipation within political and expert circles regarding Russia's brief indications of readiness for negotiations was swiftly dashed by the extensive [air attack](#) on Ukraine just days before New Year's Eve. Even before, in complete contradiction to any optimistic indications, Russia decided to increase [expenditures](#) on maintaining the army and the military-industrial complex by 70% as compared to 2022 and 130% as compared to 2022. In absolute numbers, this is around RUB 10 trillion (approximately USD 110 billion), which amounts to 29% of Russia's total state budget for 2024. Meanwhile, financing the national economy in all vital areas, such as education and healthcare, will be cut by RUB 1,6 trillion. The only area to survive cuts is the state media, which will stay at RUB 122 billion while the budget line on culture and cinematography will increase by 11%. Another area to receive increased funding of RUB 163 billion is national security, boosting the spending for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Rosgvardia, and the Secret Services.

Russia is moving towards a war economy.

Russia is moving towards a war economy. Spending 40% of the 2024 budget on

the military, defense, national security, and propaganda expenditures leaves little hope for negotiating a just peace in Ukraine. For Russia, the conditions of the victory and defeat are clear – either Russia is militarily defeated and forced to leave Ukraine, or it continues its brutal war of attrition until it achieves an agreement on some variations of its December 2021 ultimatums.

Putin will use any pause to regroup, recover resources, and strike back.

Calls for negotiating peace under Russia's terms are the fruit of a fundamental misunderstanding of how Putin thinks and operates and would, at best, freeze hostilities but won't end the war. Putin will use any pause to regroup, recover resources, and strike back. Every temporary and unsustainable pause in the war will inevitably result in more violence and brutality in the future. If Putin believes that military success is possible, he will refuse to negotiate and will keep fighting, leaving no prospect for peace until Russia hopes to outlast Ukraine's capacity to resist and Western ability to support. This is why considering concessions to Russia is dangerous and counterproductive. On the other hand, having a clear and principled position on the end state of the war and the conditions of victory and defeat in the West is crucial for countering such considerations.

The West's Unclear Objectives and Limitations in Ukraine

Western stance on Ukraine looks increasingly vulnerable as Ukraine's counter-offensive slowed down, Orbán delayed a major EU aid package for Kyiv, and major US assistance hangs on threat due to the internal party-political quarrels in Washington. Nevertheless, despite Russia's vast advantage in terms of resources, Ukraine managed to keep the initiative and remain on the offensive, denying Russian superiority in the air and on the Black Sea.

However, because of the mismatched expectations and understanding of the operational details of the counteroffensive, mainstream Western media is becoming increasingly pessimistic about Ukraine's chances to win the war, facilitating self-defeatist narratives in public discourse and policy-making circles. The lack of confidence in Ukraine's success, in turn, fuels Russian propaganda around the world. It feeds the so-called 'peace narratives,' encouraging the settlement of the conflict at the expense of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Much has been [said](#) about the West's mistakes and mishandling of the Putin-made crises, leading to a series of miscalculations resulting in the ongoing war in Ukraine. There is a discussion among expert circles about what caused the failure of Russia's Western deterrence poli-

cy. However, the real questions are: What were the goals of Western deterrence? Was deterrence aimed at avoiding a Russian attack on NATO or EU Member States, or was the aim to prevent Russia from destabilizing the Euro-Atlantic area? While finding direct answers to these questions might be challenging, analyzing the main problems of the Western response to the war in Ukraine could provide some valuable clues.

One of the fundamental problems is that the West has never clearly articulated its strategy or policy objectives regarding the war in Ukraine, leaving a vast space for uncertainty, confusion, and mudding the waters, which has traditionally been Russia's terrain and advantage. The common slogan Western leaders have been [articulating](#) since the start of the war, "Whatever it takes, as long as it takes," fails to encompass the desired end state of the conflict, leaving room for Russian propaganda to speculate on the intentions and ability of the West to maintain the necessary scope of support for Ukraine.

Another problem, partly derived from the absence of clear objectives, is the artificial limitations put on Ukraine's military strategy, [according](#) to the caveats attached to the delivery of Western weapons. As a result, Ukrainian armed forces are deprived of the possibility to hit key military and logistical targets inside Russia. This is a significant limitation that defines the

effectiveness of Russia's entrenchment on occupied territories in Ukraine. This problem is an echo of the long-standing Western fear of not provoking Russia into further escalation, which is the guiding principle of actual policies even after two years of Russia's unprovoked war of attrition against Ukraine.

Finally, the absence of clear objectives and the artificial limitations on Ukraine's military strategy diverge in the paramount problem of the delayed and insufficient weapons delivery to Ukraine. Military experts [argue](#) that the lack of political will to deliver ranged weapons for Ukraine while Russia bombards the country's entire territory excludes the possibility of Ukraine's military success in this conflict. The surest way for Ukraine to win the war would be through reaching every Russian HQ, ship, and rocket launcher with enough ATACMS and/or TAURUS long-range systems.

The current Western response leaves the impression that its objective is to inflict maximum harm on Russia and consistently deplete Russian resources rather than aiding Ukraine in achieving victory.

The current Western response leaves the impression that its objective is to inflict maximum harm on Russia and consistently deplete Russian resources rather than

aiding Ukraine in achieving victory. Such a strategy only makes sense if neither of the sides can achieve a decisive victory and there is a realistic chance to maintain the existing status quo on the battlefield. However, this approach sounds too risky as Ukraine's counteroffensive slows down, and the West hesitates to support the war effort further. It is evident that if Russia is given a chance to save face and avoid defeat in Ukraine, it will emerge as a significant geopolitical winner even with all the losses it suffered on the battlefield. Thus, a successful Western strategy aimed at supporting the victory of Ukraine would feature a well-coordinated strategic communications campaign clearly articulating that the Western objective is to help Ukraine win the war defined as the restoration of its territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and would be marked by the delivery of all appropriate weapon systems to ensure that.

Ukraine's Do-or-Die Strategy

Ukraine finds itself in an existential fight. Society is consolidated under the idea that if Ukraine fails to repel Russian aggression, Ukrainian statehood will be at stake. Two years of suffering, destruction, and sacrifice made the prospects of Ukraine having a Minsk-like agreement with Russia unthinkable. President Zelenskyy's plan reflects the Ukrainian vision of the war's end. The plan consists of ten points that are most relevant for Ukrainian, Eu-

ro-Atlantic, and even global security. The points are based on three main principles: the territorial integrity of Ukraine, security guarantees against renewed aggression, and punishment for committed war crimes. However, Zelenskyy's plan also has a sober acknowledgment that only tying peace in Ukraine with the global agenda, such as nuclear and environmental safety as well as food and energy security, can trigger a sustainable political settlement of the conflict beyond anything that can qualify as Minsk 3.0.

One of the critical political tasks for Ukraine is to convince the West that it is possible and necessary to defeat Russia. The Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, in his recent [OpEd](#), laid out three crucial factors leading to the victory of Ukraine: "adequate military aid, including jets, drones, air defense, artillery rounds, and long-range capabilities that allow us to strike deep behind enemy lines; the rapid development of industrial capacity in the United States and Europe as well as in Ukraine, both to cover Ukraine's military needs and to replenish the US and European defense stocks; and a principled and realistic approach to the prospect of negotiations with Russia." Through Crimea's annexation in 2014 and consecutive rounds of failed negotiations, Ukraine learned the hard way that territorial concessions to Russia could only delay the conflict but not deter aggression. From Ukraine's perspective, only military

success can bring lasting peace.

At this point, however, Ukraine's prospects of military success look difficult. With military support late and insufficient, an increasing number of experts [assess](#) the current situation on the battlefield as alarming for Ukraine. Russian forces have entrenched themselves behind minefields, reinforcing their positions and enormously complicating and slowing down the Ukrainian counteroffensive. The Chief of Ukraine's Armed Forces, General Valery Zaluzhny, acknowledges the current positional stalemate, which, in his assessment, favors Russia. In the General's view, switching to maneuver warfare can return Ukraine to an advantageous position, which requires technological advantage, long-range missiles to strike key logistical points, and F16s to establish air superiority. In other words, Ukraine's military success on the battlefield can be facilitated by the paradigm shift in the West's approach towards its strategy of supporting Ukraine.

Military and political components of Western support for Ukraine are intrinsically interdependent.

Current and former commanders of the United States European Command, Generals Cavoli, and Hodges, explain that through full-fledged military support and the delivery of high-technology weapons systems to Ukraine, it is realistic to

achieve a decisive breakthrough on the battlefield. The precision can defeat the numbers - the only advantage Russia now has. If the West delivers what Ukraine needs, military victory is realistically achievable. Leading military experts tend to [agree](#) with the military leaders that Kyiv will have a realistic pathway to victory if Ukraine can achieve momentum in the ground war while also gaining the advantage at sea and in the air through the combination of military techniques. Military and political components of Western support for Ukraine are intrinsically interdependent. Adequate military support will not be possible without a clear political resolve, which in turn is largely determined by the military success.

Implications and Consequences of the Dilemma

The conflict in Ukraine holds implications beyond the immediate region, affecting the rules-based international system. The crisis underscores the need for a robust international response to unprovoked aggression, highlighting the importance of solid leadership exhibited by the West, in general, and the United States, in particular. A key question at stake in the war in Ukraine is whether the West can protect its partners or whether vulnerable partners will perpetually remain hostage to Russia's destabilizing actions.

The crisis, originating outside the EU

and NATO, has significantly impacted Euro-Atlantic security. A more assertive posture and clear messaging could have deterred the conflict. The dynamics have shifted, with Russia losing influence due to its actions in Ukraine, and there is an opportunity for the West to finally eliminate division lines in Europe, ensuring every sovereign nation has the right to be part of Europe whole, free and at peace.

Negotiations will only be possible if Russia refuses the sphere of exclusive influence and withdraws its troops from Ukraine.

Russia's unrealistic preconditions for peace and its accelerated rhetoric and actions for supporting long-term war efforts prove that there is no space to negotiate a

lasting and just peace with Putin's regime. Negotiations will only be possible if Russia refuses the sphere of exclusive influence and withdraws its troops from Ukraine.

Georgia and Moldova, caught in the cross-fire between Russia and the West, will have an opportunity to escape the "gray zone" and pursue meaningful integration into European and Euro-Atlantic frameworks only if Ukraine wins the war. The victory of Ukraine should include defining conditions for Russia's return to the civilized world, including the complete withdrawal from occupied territories, the denouncement of illegal annexations, and the recognition of the right of nations to choose alliances, something which is essential for achieving these goals■

Faith No More: The Knock-On Price of Abandoning Ukraine

The war is still raging in Ukraine, and as 2024 dawns, the international headlines are increasingly gloomy. Combat has ground down to the slog of a war of attrition. Ukrainian defenders are dying, and their nations' will to fight needs to be rekindled. But the opposite is happening. The partisan bickering in the United States has drained its war coffers, and the brinkmanship by the "Kremlin's Trojan horse," Viktor Orbán, did the same for the European Union. The upcoming European Parliament elections, the subsequent re-forging of the Commission, and, even more importantly, the US Presidential elections have put Ukraine's allies in a risk- and action-averse mode. The expert community started to ponder the ["price of losing Ukraine."](#)

The upcoming European Parliament elections, the subsequent re-forging of the Commission, and, even more importantly, the US Presidential elections have put Ukraine's allies in a risk-and action-averse mode.

As a seasoned expert on Russian and US foreign policy, Fiona Hill has [convincingly argued](#): "We've now reached a tipping point between whether Ukraine continues to win in terms of having sufficient fighting power to stave Russia off or whether it actually starts to lose because it doesn't have the equipment, the heavy weaponry, the ammunition."



Jaba Devdariani
Contributor

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

If Ukraine is forced into negotiating on Moscow's terms once again, into conceding part of its territory to an aggressor, that would only happen because the collective West, and the United States, in particular, stepped back from supporting Kyiv in a winnable fight.

Therein lies the key reflection: if Ukraine is forced into negotiating on Moscow's terms once again, into conceding part of its territory to an aggressor, that would only happen because the collective West, and the United States, in particular, stepped back from supporting Kyiv in a winnable fight.

The consequences for Ukraine will be dire. It may falter economically and politically or hold on with the sheer grit and perseverance it has shown before. But whatever Ukraine does, the refusal of the West from backing its ally in the fight would have profound and dire geopolitical, moral, and practical implications for Georgia and Russia's other neighbors outside of the NATO shield.

As this publication has written before, Georgia's current administration is already on the path of accommodating Russia economically and politically and has de-coupled from the liberal Western ideologically. While this strategy partly and perhaps even dominantly reflects

the [pragmatic self-interest](#) of the ruling oligarch, some in Georgia's foreign policy and political establishment also genuinely believe it is in the national interest as the only way to avoid direct confrontation with Russia. They consider that the significant but distant returns from an alignment with the West are far outweighed by the costs (punishment, to borrow the words of former Prime Minister) that Moscow can inflict in the short-term perspective.

Resistance Is Foolish?

Hope is the combustible that drives the engine of progress. The Kremlin's work in its neighborhood was previously [compared](#) to that of the ghoulish Dementors from J.K. Rowling's bestselling Harry Potter fantasy series, who are depicted in the book as literally sucking hope and joy from their victims to subjugate them and making them docile, passive.

If Georgia's newly minted candidacy to the European Union were to transform into something more tangible, it would require a considerable adjustment from Georgians at all levels. Certainly, democratization and the rule of law are apparent priorities for Brussels, but transposing the *acquis* also means numerous adaptations in the economy and the way of doing things, from agriculture to how the city elevators are managed. This change is costly. It upsets the power relations in



innumerable ways. The botched or rushed efforts at societal transformation can backfire – as Georgia's previous pro-reform administration had found out, to its political and personal peril.

To back reforms and sustain the adjustments they require, society at large needs hope and a visible horizon of tangible success in individual, societal, and national terms. Georgia's former Ambassador to the EU, Natalie Sabanadze, [wrote](#) recently that Georgia's "democratization became inseparable from its Westernization" from the early days of its restored independence in 1991. We may add that the aim of recognition as a member of the Western family of nations has been the beacon for transformation even before, during the brief period of independence in 1918-1921.

Of course, there are tangible economic and social benefits to be drawn from EU membership, as the EU information campaigns often tell Georgians. But that objective also has an irrational, emotional element, with the power to bring people to the streets and [resist water cannons](#) with the EU flag in their hands.

This is the sentiment that is shared in Ukraine, where people stood shoulder to shoulder with the same EU flags on Maidan and resisted bullets. That hope, mixed with anger at the aggressor, still drives Ukraine's resistance, just like it drove Georgia's reforms earlier and nu-

merous protests demanding political transformation through the past decades. Against the reforms necessary for EU membership are the formidable challenges of oligarchic control, corruption, administrative sclerosis, institutional weakness, and gaps in education and infrastructure. But in a much more damaging way, in Georgia, the home-grown narratives of cynicism are poised to destroy hope, polarize the extremes, and foment civic apathy among the majority. These narratives are fortified by the (un)healthy dollop of anti-Western propaganda fanned by pro-Russian actors. Kyiv's lack of progress on the front and each misstep of Western allies are amplified by the Kremlin's mouthpieces.

One part of that mortifying narrative is more traditional. It raises the slimy specter of the West's moral decay, the incompatibility of family and Orthodox Christian values with those of the decadent "LGBT West," something that Vladimir Putin himself spoke about on the eve of the invasion.

But another, perhaps more potent, narrative speaks about the perfidy, cupidity, and duplicity of the West. According to this worldview, the collective West likes to preach human rights and democratic values, but it is just as corrupt, ruthless, and self-interested as Russia. If you have to choose between two comparable evils, choose the one that is physically closer to

you and could hurt you more, the Kremlin tells the average Georgian Joe. It is a gangster's proposition, to be sure, but made no less convincing by that.

If the United States and Europe opt out of Ukraine now, after so much resistance and sacrifice that the Ukrainian people have shown, simply because of their internal politicking, what is a pro-Western politician or activist to say to the Georgian voter to convince them to stay the course?! After all, Georgia has adapted itself to conquerors before. Is it not foolish to die resisting when you know the help is not forthcoming? Is it not wiser to survive and keep whatever of your identity, culture, and language that is possible while adapting? The pragmatic choice seems simple to make. It is also what Russia wants its neighbors to believe.

Slipping Into Shadows

If the West pushes Ukraine to sign the harmful deal at the negotiating table with the aggressor, Georgia would simply fade into the Kremlin's shadow, EU candidacy or not. To begin with, it is already halfway there. Only the heroic and – to many – surprising resistance from the street has [prevented](#) the ruling party from enacting repressive laws that would have curbed free media and civil society.

If the West pushes Ukraine to sign the harmful deal at the negotiating table with the aggressor, Georgia would simply fade into the Kremlin's shadow, EU candidacy or not.

Georgia's pro-Western attitude is generalized, but it may also be shallow. The group willing to actively defend this choice is within 10-12%, according to the unpublished polling of the Georgian CSOs' stratcom, an informal group that tracks political attitudes. Only up to 20-23% of voters are willing to back pro-Western parties. However, security concerns dominate, and Russia's aggression is perceived with justified fear. Even in the generally pro-Western crowd, doubts are lingering on whether "traditional Georgian values" are compatible with European ways.

If the Western allies are proven unwilling to keep backing Ukraine, this will kick the ground from under the feet of pro-European Georgian activists who base their ideological legitimacy on two related tenets.

One is the professed cultural and political affinity with Europe, a foundational narrative since the thought about its modern nationhood in the late 19th century started to germinate and later gave birth to its independent statehood.



Another is security-related and paints the West as the preferred ally and protector against Georgia's predatory regional neighbors. In collective memory, that idea dates to the 17th century when the Georgian King is said to have first sought protection from France. Russia was then considered the second-best alternative to Europe as a fellow Christian nation against predominantly Muslim regional powers.

When Georgia's Social-Democratic Government in 1918-1921 sought membership in the League of Nations and military alliances first with Germany and then the UK, it also sought protection from Bolshevik Russia. In modern times, for similar reasons, Georgia has become the leading mil-

itary reformer and dedicated contributor to NATO-led missions in Kosovo and Iraq and the US-led mission to Afghanistan.

Getting under the Western security shield is perceived as a preferred way to gain a clear pathway to growth, prosperity, and stability.

The Kremlin cannot deny the easily observable economic advantage that the West has over Russia in terms of the quality of life. But it has been actively chipping away at the ideological tenets. The cultural affinity narrative is being weakened by embedding the thought that Orthodox values (whatever they may be) are incompatible with Western ones. Championed by the Georgian Orthodox Church, this school of thought has become [the ideological mainstay pushed](#) by the ruling party.

Regarding Georgia getting the Western security shield, Russia clearly stated its opposition. It acted upon its words in 2008 when NATO dawdled on its decision to grant the membership action plan (MAP) to Georgia (and Ukraine). Recently, the ruling party leaders have increasingly cast that episode as a betrayal and thus justified their reluctance to support Ukraine. The Parliamentary speaker said: "Georgia was subject to unfair, almost hypocritical treatment...despite Georgia's precarious existence under the foreign occupation and daily experience of threats and ha-

rassment, the West remained unfazed.”

If Ukraine is left without the critical means to liberate its occupied land, it would signify that Russia manages to alter the strategic posture of Washington and Brussels despite their pledges of support to Kyiv “whatever it takes.”

Russia’s demonstration of its capability to alter the will of the US is likely to detonate the tenets of Georgia’s pro-Western affinity.

Russia’s demonstration of its capability to alter the will of the US is likely to detonate the tenets of Georgia’s pro-Western affinity. The Russian narrative about Western duplicity would be proven correct. Once the faith in the feasibility of entering the common security space is gone, so will the sentiments of affinity.

Moscow would not have to occupy Georgia militarily. Its European dream will crumble, and [“the Kremlin’s silent victory”](#) – already in the offing – will be complete.

What About Ukraine?

Just like Ukraine’s trajectory during this year would be detrimental to Georgia’s political future, the path that Georgia traveled after the defeat in 2008 should be instructive for Western policymakers.

Russia managed to defeat Georgia’s mili-

tary quickly in 2008 and occupied the two provinces of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. But contrary to the fears (and hopes?) of some, Georgia’s statehood did not crumble, and the major force of the army was preserved. The European Union and the US gave the country an economic and financial lifeline that limited the damage and kept the economy working.

But hope and the country’s sense of purpose were lost. With reforms relying more on individual enthusiasm than institutional strength, the reform drive has faltered. In 2012, Georgians voted for the political force that promised: “to take Georgia off the map of the contest between Russia and the West.” Through subsequent electoral cycles, the Georgian Dream has downshifted further away from dynamism, essentially plunging the country into immobilism, with periodic flashes of reactionary decisions that have now put Georgia ideologically closer to Hungary or Serbia.

Ukraine is a larger country; it has already paid a terrible cost to human lives through its wrecked infrastructural and industrial base. A nation that feels victorious can brave the difficult times and even take the amputation of some of its lands if it perceives that the peaceful future of its children is assured. But if this conflict is frozen at today’s lines, and Ukraine does not get the tangible security umbrella under

which to shelter, there can be no assurance of peace in Ukraine or beyond.

Will Europe or the United States commit the boots on the ground to protect Ukraine and pay the potential blood cost? When they could not muster the courage to pay for the war effort in kind? If the an-

swer to that question is negative, Ukraine will quietly slip under Russia's shadow, too. To paraphrase the poet, it has gone raging into that dark night, but that darkness will now be at Europe's inner gate. ■

Georgia's Fractured Friendship with Ukraine

In the long “thank you” list that the Georgian Prime Minister read on December 15, 2023, when Georgia obtained the EU candidate status, there was no mention of Ukraine or its people. Yet it was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or rather a courageous resistance of the Ukrainians, that played a pivotal role in thrusting the enlargement issue back onto the European agenda.

Profound antipathy harbored towards Ukraine by the current Georgian leadership dates back to the first years of the Georgian Dream (GD) in power, undermining the almost twenty-year-long strategic partnership between Kyiv and Tbilisi from the early days of independence. To-

day, neither Ukraine nor Georgia maintains an ambassadorial presence in each other's capitals. President Zelenskyy personally [demanded](#) the departure of Georgia's ambassador in July 2023.

Post-independence Strategic Alliance

Ukraine, or more precisely, the concept of an independent and pro-Western Ukraine, has consistently discovered an ally in Georgia. Ukrainian volunteers displayed remarkable valor in their struggle against Russian and pro-Russian forces during the Abkhazian War of 1992-1993, and their acts of bravery are now an integral part of the collective memory of the Abkhaz conflict.



Thorniké Gordadze
Contributor

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A substantial level of cooperation and strategic partnership was achieved during the 1990s under the leadership of Presidents Leonid Kuchma and Eduard Shevardnadze. It was during this period that the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) organization, comprising four post-Soviet states with an ambition to counter Russia's influence, was established.

Under President Mikheil Saakashvili's administration (2004-2012), Georgian-Ukrainian relations reached new heights. Many Georgians actively participated in Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004, following the color revolution in Georgia in November 2003. The leadership of both countries exhibited a complete mutual understanding and shared positions on crucial matters such as Russia, the European Union, and NATO, and the fundamental principles of international law, particularly the principle of upholding the territorial integrity of states within their internationally recognized borders. This extraordinary closeness was epitomized by the baptismal ties between Saakashvili and Ukraine's President Viktor Yushchenko, with the latter becoming the godfather of Saakashvili's youngest son.

Consequently, both nations faced escalating tensions with Moscow, including Kremlin-led destabilization attempts and trade and energy embargoes. Despite the Orange Revolutionaries' defeat in the 2010

elections and the ascendance of Viktor Yanukovich, a former regional leader in Donbas with close Moscow ties, Georgia made efforts to maintain positive relations with Kyiv. This was especially pertinent since Ukraine ostensibly continued to assert its official commitment to European integration as its ultimate foreign policy objective. Furthermore, Yanukovich did not blindly adhere to Moscow's policies towards Tbilisi, notably by maintaining support for the territorial integrity of Georgia.

From Friends to Foes

The transformation from friends to foes began in 2012 with the rise of the "Georgian Dream" led by Bidzina Ivanishvili in Tbilisi, coinciding with Ukraine's second popular revolution known as "Euro-Maidan," which ousted the pro-Russian oligarchy in Ukraine, ushering in pro-Western forces determined to reestablish ties with the EU and NATO. These divergent political shifts sowed the initial seeds of discord.

The transformation from friends to foes began in 2012 with the rise of the "Georgian Dream" led by Bidzina Ivanishvili.

The Georgian Dream government did not endorse the Euro-Maidan revolution as it unfolded; in fact, it exhibited sympathies toward Yanukovich. Notably, former Dynamo Kyiv player Kakha Kaladze, one of



the Georgian Dream founding leaders and now a mayor of Tbilisi, downplayed the revolutionary mood of Ukrainians, notoriously [claiming](#) that events in Kyiv had no massive character and were “confined to the Hrushchevski Street.”

In contrast to the Government, the Georgian opposition viewed Ukraine’s pro-European victory as an opportunity to transfer the anti-Putin resistance from Tbilisi to Kyiv. With Georgian new leadership propagating dialogue with Moscow, Kyiv seemed an obvious choice for countering Russian influence in the wider neighborhood.

In addition, the Georgian opposition also fancied the idea that the pro-Russian government could be ousted through a peaceful revolution, something that had already been done in 2003. As the Georgian Dream tightened its hold on power, demonstrations in Tbilisi protesting the Government’s actions and decisions acquired a regular character. Conversely, the Georgian Dream dubbed all opposition parties as radical and blamed them for planning a coup d’état. Thus, Ukraine, as a model for power change, became just as unacceptable for the Georgian Dream as the color revolutions, in general, became for Putin.

Ukraine’s new government sought rapid anti-corruption reforms, and Georgia, with a track record of successful reforms

in 2004–2012, provided Ukraine with a pool of experienced former civil servants, officials, and politicians, many of whom left the state service (and even had to flee the country) after the Georgian Dream’s initial cleansing of the state apparatus from the sympathizers of “the previous bloody regime.” This influx of Georgians to Ukraine culminated in the naturalization and appointment of former Georgian President Saakashvili as governor of the Odesa region.

Ivanishvili’s Georgia did not offer significant political, military, or financial support to Ukraine during Russia’s annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014. While Tbilisi officially backed Ukraine’s territorial integrity, signs of divergence in the political agendas became evident immediately. Prime Minister Gharibashvili’s 2014 BBC [interview](#) underscored this shift when he explicitly separated Georgia from Ukraine, emphasizing that Ukraine’s problems with Russia were distinct from Georgia’s. Gharibashvili stated that Georgia engaged in dialogue with Russia and expected it to yield results. This shift had adverse consequences, as the EU began using Georgia as a precedent to pressure Ukraine into finding common ground with Putin despite Crimea’s annexation and invasion of Donbas.

Saakashvili’s resignation as governor of Odesa, his rift with President Petro Poros-

henko, and his subsequent departure from Ukraine to the EU did not mend relations between the Georgian and Ukrainian governments. This indicated that the deterioration was more profound and extended beyond symbolic personalities.

After Volodymyr Zelenskyy came to power in 2019, many in Georgia believed that he would reengage with Russia and Georgia, but the reality proved to be different. Zelenskyy rehabilitated Saakashvili, [restored](#) his Ukrainian citizenship, and [appointed](#) him to an official position as the head of the National Reform Coordination Office. For the Georgian Dream, therefore, nothing changed, and the policy of no high-level contacts and visits was maintained. Moreover, Zelenskyy proved to be anti-Russian, not the type of friend Ivashvili and his prime ministers sought.

Saakashvili's arrest in 2021, following his spontaneous [return](#) to Georgia before the local elections, further strained Georgian-Ukrainian relations. Saakashvili's detention, mistreatment in the prison and hospital, and deterioration of health condition [gave](#) Zelenskyy an official reason to expel the Georgian ambassador in July 2023. However, the main disagreement between Kyiv and Tbilisi was yet to come.

War, Popular Support, and the Georgian Legion

After Putin invaded Ukraine in February

2022, Georgia, just like the rest of Europe, was shocked and sympathetic toward Ukraine. Georgian Dream [denounced](#) Moscow in words; however, when the West imposed sanctions, Tbilisi [refrained](#) from joining them. Later, Tbilisi opened the door to Russian immigrants fleeing first sanctions and then the military draft, and finally, in 2023, agreed to the [resumption](#) of flights with Moscow – in other words, reverting to business as usual. These decisions, as well as muted political support for the Zelenskyy government and refraining from criticizing Moscow, either because of fear or “quasi-rational” calculations, totally destroyed trust between Ukraine and Georgia.

Few countries exhibit such robust societal backing for Ukraine as Georgia does.

In contrast to the government's stance, the people of Georgia consistently showed strong [support](#) for Ukraine and its war effort. Few countries exhibit such robust societal backing for Ukraine as Georgia does. Notably, Tbilisi stands out globally as a city where Ukrainian flags adorn the balconies of ordinary citizens, grace shop and café windows, and countless graffiti praising Ukraine's armed forces embellish downtown walls.

Numerous private initiatives spearheaded by everyday Georgian citizens reflect this solidarity, resulting in the collection

of funds for the Ukrainian army, the dispatch of humanitarian aid, and the warm welcome extended to Ukrainian refugees. These grassroots initiatives led by thousands of Georgians far outshine the meager assistance initially provided by the Georgian government at the outset of the invasion.

Furthermore, Georgian volunteers constitute the largest foreign contingent within the Ukrainian armed forces. The renowned “Georgian Legion” is just one example, with numerous Georgian nationals serving in various other units. Many of these Georgians, often former professionals from the Georgian armed forces, have been active in Ukraine since 2014.

The Georgian government’s initiation of political purges within military and security structures, particularly among special forces personnel trained by American or NATO instructors, prompted the exodus of many soldiers from the country. Ukraine offered them refuge and fresh career opportunities. For instance, Georgian special forces officers Giorgi Kuprashvili and Bakhva Chikobava, killed in defending Mariupol, [played](#) pivotal roles in establishing the Azov battalion (later brigade) and were the first foreign instructors to operate in the Azov military camp near Kyiv in 2014.

Based on our interviews with Georgian military personnel engaged in Ukraine,

approximately 1,000 to 1,100 Georgians serve continuously under the Ukrainian flag, while the total number of Georgians who have fought against Russian forces on Ukrainian soil since February 2022 exceeds 3,000. Tragically, over 60 of them have lost their lives on various Ukrainian fronts. Despite the Georgian Dream’s stance, many Georgians regard these individuals as heroes.

Unsurprisingly, the Georgian Government has not concealed its hostility toward the Legion. In the initial weeks of the Russian aggression, it [attempted](#) to prevent charter flights of Georgian volunteers from departing Tbilisi. Additionally, the parliamentary majority contemplated stripping Georgian citizenship from anyone deciding to serve in the Ukrainian armed forces. Although the threat wasn’t ultimately put into action, several Georgian fighters faced criminal cases initiated by the authorities, and some risked arrest if they attempted to return to the country.

This disparity in attitudes between the government and the people of Georgia has led to a stark contrast in how Ukrainian authorities approach the two.

This disparity in attitudes between the government and the people of Georgia has led to a stark contrast in how Ukrainian authorities approach the two. It has become increasingly common for Ukrainian

officials to express their gratitude and best wishes to the Georgian population while bypassing the country's official authorities. President Zelenskyy even [addressed](#) the Georgian crowd in Tbilisi, who gathered in solidarity with Ukraine in March 2022. In turn, the Georgian government has used such positioning of Kyiv as justification for its unsupportive stance towards Ukraine.

Explaining the Fracture

The power of the Georgian Dream (GD) rests on two key foundations: a conciliatory, even compliant approach toward Putin's Russia and the sustained exertion of pressure on domestic adversaries, including the political opposition, critical, independent media, and a substantial segment of civil society. Within this context, Ukraine represents a dual challenge and consequently poses a significant threat.

First and foremost, successful Ukrainian resistance to Russia and sustained Western support demonstrates the feasibility of standing up to Moscow. This contrasts with the domestic GD narrative that Russia is invincible and any resistance is futile – either a form of madness or a “directive” from external anti-Russian forces. This narrative aligns with the GD's interpretation of the 2008 war in Georgia – not a Russian aggression but an endeavor of Saakashvili's making. According to this narrative, one can negotiate peace

with Russia, and the existence of conflict should not prevent good people-to-people and commercial relations since the Russian market is a “natural commercial opportunity” for the Georgian economy.

Secondly, a triumphant Ukraine and a weakened Russia would substantially alter the regional balance of power, with Kyiv potentially emerging as a new regional force capable of influencing Georgia's domestic politics, likely not to the GD's advantage. Indeed, the entire Georgian opposition vests hope in Ukraine's victory. Opposition politicians regularly visit Kyiv to strengthen ties with Ukrainian authorities, and certain Ukrainian politicians openly support the Georgian opposition, such as the influential MP David Arakhamia, who is of Georgian origin.

Additionally, the issue of the Georgian Legion comes into play. The Georgian regime harbors apprehensions concerning the prestige, expertise, and combat experience of Georgian fighters, as well as the potential consequences of their return to Georgia. Above all, the government is concerned that Georgian legionnaires might be plotting a coup d'état. Leaders of the ruling party have propagated a conspiracy theory [alleging](#) collaboration between the Kyiv government, the Georgian opposition, and Georgian fighters engaged in Ukraine, all purportedly encouraged by Washington and Brussels. The overarching objective of this global conspiracy the-

ory ostensibly revolves around opening a second front against Russia and “dragging” Georgia into the war.

The most irritating aspect of Georgia’s conduct toward Ukraine is the indirect economic support that Tbilisi inadvertently extends to Moscow.

Perhaps the most irritating aspect of Georgia’s conduct toward Ukraine is the indirect economic support that Tbilisi inadvertently extends to Moscow by allowing the indirect transit of sanctioned goods. As explained in the article by our editor, Georgia does not directly circumvent the sanctions. However, the goods flowing through Georgian territory to neighboring states and Central Asian countries are highly likely to end up in Russia. While the EU shares Ukraine’s concerns on this matter, its response has been less strict – just an expression of hope that Georgia continues cooperating with the EU.

Unlike the EU, Kyiv [imposed](#) sanctions on fifteen Georgian individuals, most of whom are members of the Ivanishvili family or closely associated with it. Ukraine also strives to have specific Georgian figures included on American and European sanction lists. The decision to launch direct flights from Georgia to Russia, which drew [condemnation](#) and strong criticism from the EU and the US, [prompted](#) Kyiv to add Georgian Airways, Georgia’s flagship

carrier, to its list of sanctioned airlines.

When Georgian authorities explain the deterioration of bilateral relations with Ukraine, they often downplay the issue of sanctions and instead emphasize other contentious points. These include Ukraine’s alleged desire to see Georgia embroiled in a conflict with Russia to alleviate the pressure on Ukrainian armed forces or concerns related to Saakashvili’s health. This tactic serves as an attempt to divert the discourse away from the real issue – two ideologies and approaches regarding Russia.

Anti-Ukrainian Propaganda As a Tool to Stay in Power

The Georgian Government’s communication regarding Ukraine has two primary aspects: one is aimed at reassuring Russia, while the other is focused on persuading the public that GD’s stance is the only good alternative. Relations with the EU and the West are viewed through these prisms. Moscow appreciates Tbilisi’s position regarding the conflict in Ukraine, its reluctance to support Ukraine, and its refusal to condemn Russia despite the latter’s occupation of 20% of Georgian territory. Even more significantly, Russia sees that Georgia’s position helps Russia to mitigate the impact of sanctions. Russian mouthpieces, starting with top diplomat Sergey Lavrov and ending with daily propagandists like Margarita Simonian and

Vladimir Solovev, often speak [highly](#) of the “wise stance” taken by Georgian leadership, highlighting their perceived “resistance” to the directives of Washington and Brussels.

Domestic communication of the Georgian Dream primarily evolves around the concept of peace. The Georgian Dream party strongly advocates the notion that it successfully achieved peace with Russia, in contrast to Ukraine and the former UNM government. The subliminal message implies that Zelenskyy and Saakashvili, whether due to recklessness or a disregard for national interests, led their countries into an unwinnable war against Russia. The distribution of images depicting human and material devastation in pro-government media aims to evoke fear of the horrors of war and cultivate an appreciation for the wisdom of the Georgian government. The emphasis on how Zelenskyy “sacrificed” the Ukrainians mirrors the portrayal of how Saakashvili “sacrificed” the Georgians in 2008, highlighting a contrast with how Ivanishvili has “protected” his population over the past 11 years.

To further accentuate this “success,” the government continues to propagate messages about the pressure they face from Ukraine and the West, insinuating that they were pushing Georgia towards a conflict with Russia. All of this is done without acknowledging that the ongoing war originated with Russia’s invasion and

subsequent occupation and annexation of Ukraine’s sovereign territories. Members of the ruling party, the mayor of Tbilisi, and even former Prime Minister himself nurture the notion that the West is punishing Georgia and its unofficial leader, Ivanishvili, because of their refusal to engage in war. Thus, if Georgia’s EU candidate status was delayed, it was because of Tbilisi’s refusal to comply with Brussels’ demands and escalate tensions with Moscow, whereas Ukraine was granted candidate status as compensation for the conflict with Russia.

Due to the widespread pro-Ukrainian sentiments among the Georgian population and the fact that copying Russian narratives about “Ukrainian Nazi LGBTs” is not credible in Georgia, the government is unable to engage in anti-Ukrainian propaganda directly. Nevertheless, they are discrediting Ukraine and its leadership through indirect means. While the mainstream of the Georgian Dream engages in subtle and complex criticism of Ukraine and the West, the satellite groups that have been created and nurtured by GD are more straightforward and unambiguous in their attacks, openly expressing support for Russia’s success.

Entities like the PosTV network, the People’s Power party, Alt-Info, and other various far-right and extremist groups closely affiliated with GD are less concerned with subtlety and diplomatic language. It’s a

well-established GD strategy to ensure its message reaches the public through these alternative groups. For example, the “foreign agents bill” was introduced into Parliament by the People’s Power party but received votes from all GD MPs.

The primacy of maintaining power dictates the actions of the Georgian Dream and its leadership.

Therefore, it is not accidental that Georgia turned its back on Ukraine. The primacy of maintaining power dictates the actions of the Georgian Dream and its leadership. Whether because of the fear of Russia, disbelief that Ukraine can really win the war, or strategic geopolitical calculations, one thing is clear – the Government of Georgia chose sides in the Russia-Ukraine war, and it is not the side of the West, EU, and Kyiv. ■

Georgia's Two-Faced Support for Ukraine

When Russia invaded Ukraine, the West stood by Kyiv's side with arms, money, humanitarian assistance, sanctions against Moscow, and diplomatic and political support. Georgia, however, decided to cherry-pick from the available options, sparing a two-year-long discussion about whether its support for Ukraine is sufficient, rational, and moral.

When the Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili [declared](#) on 25 February 2022 that Georgia was not joining the Western sanctions against Russia, the overwhelming feeling in Georgia and Western capitals was that Tbilisi chose the wrong side. Indeed, in February–March 2022, not being fully on Kyiv's side, as President Zelenskyy and his team heroically stood up to Mos-

cow, left no room for interpretation. Either you were with Ukraine or with Russia. And not joining the sanctions against Russia meant that you were not with Ukraine.

The traditionally friendly relations between Ukraine and Georgia were already at their low in 2022. Former President Mikheil Saakashvili and his colleagues have occupied high positions of power in Ukraine since 2014, something which caused irrational irritation in Tbilisi. The Georgian Dream was adamant about getting these former high officials either arrested or extradited, failing all attempts until Saakashvili fell into their hands in late 2021 when he smuggled himself into Georgia and was arrested shortly after. The neutralization of the main foe, how-



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ever, did not soothe the differences Tbilisi had with Kyiv.

And then the war started. Georgia had to make a choice, whether to support Ukraine against a common enemy fully and unconditionally or to find a middle ground without upsetting Russia and instigating its wrath in the form of aggression or any other punitive measure. While the probability of Russia's aggression against Georgia as the war raged in Ukraine was not high, many in Georgia could not help but wonder what Moscow would do if Kyiv fell shortly after the invasion.

The decision by the Georgian Dream government not to extend the full possible support to Kyiv was only partially motivated by the fear of Moscow. Another, just as important component was the disbelief that Russia could be defeated on the battlefield and that Ukraine could win. Finally, as Thorniké Gordadze explains in another article in this volume, the reluctance to see Ukraine rise to the status of regional power and change the geopolitical status quo in the region also played a role in determining the Georgian Dream's position.

Political Silence vs. Diplomatic and Humanitarian Support

Since the start of the war, Georgia has pursued a two-faced approach. On the one hand, the Georgian diplomatic service offered unwavering support for Ukraine in

international organizations, and the Government of Georgia provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and the refugees fleeing the war.

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On the other hand, Georgia's political leaders did not support Ukraine at the political level. Unlike Western leaders who made high-profile visits to Kyiv to express solidarity, Georgian leaders were notably absent from such diplomatic gestures. When President Zelenskyy addressed European and Western Parliaments online, seeking political, economic, and military support, the Georgian Parliament was not on the list. This absence was particularly striking when compared to the events of August 2008 when leaders of Eastern European countries, including Ukraine's then-President Viktor Yushchenko, traveled to Georgia during the five-day war with Russia. This difference in approach was indicative of Georgia's two-faced stance during the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

Furthermore, the Georgian Dream government exploited the Ukrainian tragedy for domestic political purposes. Their message centered on a "peace vs. war" scare tactic, portraying the West and Ukraine as dragging Georgia into the war against the interests of ordinary Georgians. The ruling party positioned itself as

a wise guardian, preventing Georgia from opening a “second front.”

Former Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili even went as far as [blaming](#) NATO’s expansion strategy for Russia’s invasion in an attempt to appease Moscow. This rhetoric resonated with the Georgian Dream’s long-standing message that negotiation with Russia was possible and that irritating Moscow could lead to undesirable consequences.

Georgia’s diplomatic support for Ukraine, however, remained relatively high. Not only did the Georgian ambassador and embassy personnel stay in Kyiv throughout the first months of the war, but Georgia supported, joined, or co-sponsored over 500 resolutions, statements, joint statements, and initiatives proposed within major international organizations and institutions.

The Georgian government joined various international endeavors against Russia and in support of Ukraine. For instance, when the Russian aggression and acts of atrocities were [referred](#) to the International Criminal Court’s (ICC) prosecutor, Tbilisi was among the co-signatories. When the Ramstein format was established, the Georgian defense minister also [joined](#) in, and when a group of friends about Russia’s accountability was created, Georgia also signed up.

Within the United Nations, Georgia [co-sponsored](#) the UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions Aggression against Ukraine, Humanitarian Consequences of the War, and Principles of the UN Charter that Underline the Comprehensive, Just, and Lasting Peace in Ukraine. In these resolutions, Russian aggression was condemned, and an immediate withdrawal of the Russian military was demanded.

Georgia also co-sponsored the UNGA resolution on the Suspension of the Rights of Membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council and the Human Rights Council resolution on the Situation of Human Rights in Ukraine Stemming from the Russian Aggression, which condemned “in the strongest possible terms” the human rights violations and abuses resulting from the aggression against Ukraine by Russia.

Similar diplomatic vigor was observed in the Council of Europe. In February 2022, right after the Russian invasion, Georgia voted in favor of suspending Russia’s voting rights in the Council of Europe’s institutions. A month later, in March 2022, Georgia also supported the decision of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to kick Russia out of the organization. Georgia also joined other European nations in founding the register of damage caused by Russian aggression, also an initiative within the Council of Europe.

However, when it came to the more political arm of the Council of Europe – the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), where the Georgian Dream MPs are represented, activity was nowhere close to the diplomatic efforts. In the fall of 2023, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted two significant resolutions. The first recognized the Great Famine (Holodomor) as an act of genocide against Ukraine, and the second declared Russia a dictatorship, calling on the international community to reject Vladimir Putin's presidency after 2024. PACE also supported the creation of an international criminal tribunal to investigate Russia's role in Crimea, the war in Donbas, and the MH17 plane crash in 2014. Georgian Dream MPs did not participate in these votes, citing other important "commitments" as reasons for their absence.

A similar trend was visible within the OSCE. Georgia [supported](#) the invocation of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism in response to Russia's war on Ukraine in March 2022. However, during the 2023 OSCE ministerial council, Georgia's foreign minister did not join the walk-out of the Western nations when Russia's foreign minister addressed the ministerial. In the speech, however, Georgia's foreign minister condemned the "ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine" and expressed "unwavering

support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Not Joining, But Implementing – Georgia's Stance on Sanctions

One of the most contentious aspects of Georgia's role in the Ukraine-Russia conflict was its stance on international sanctions against Russia. While many Western countries, including the European Union and the United States, imposed sanctions to pressure Russia for its aggressive actions in Ukraine, Georgia found itself in a peculiar position – choosing not to join these sanctions but claiming that it is implementing them.

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The only set of sanctions that Georgia joined were the ones related to goods and products originating from Crimea. Georgia has aligned with similar restrictive measures since 2014. Georgia, however, did not join any other sanctions imposed by the EU, which brought down its alignment rate with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy significantly. In 2023, almost half of the EU's foreign policy statements were about the restrictive measures against

Russia. Not aligning with them left serious questions about Georgia's foreign policy alignment.

Georgia did join the sanctions imposed on Russia's financial institutions because of the international nature of these sanctions. The banking sector in Georgia, which is heavily dependent on international financial institutions and includes two publicly listed banks (TBC Bank and Bank of Georgia), complied fully with the sanctions regime from day one. Furthermore, Russian VTB Bank was compelled to sell a significant portion of its portfolio to Georgian banks, Basis Bank and Liberty Bank, after the intervention from the National Bank of Georgia (NBG).

The Georgian government claimed that even though it did not officially join the sanctions, it has set up a system at customs to prevent the export of those EU-imported goods to Russia that are sanctioned. In a public report, the government [claimed](#) that it had prevented about 1,000 shipments of this sort to Russia. Georgian authorities also did not allow the use of Georgian territory to circumvent the sanctions on military or dual-purpose goods.

Moreover, Georgia periodically made concrete decisions to align its actions with the EU's sanctions. For instance, in September 2023, Georgia [banned](#) the re-export of specific EU-made cars to Russia

and Belarus. The ban applied to vehicles with an engine capacity of more than 1,900 cm and electric vehicles. In 2022, Georgia also banned the export of such vehicles that cost more than EUR 50,000. The number of cars exported to Russia, therefore, [fell](#) from almost 700 cars sold per month during January – July 2023 to just 85 cars exported in August and only four in November 2023.

This approach of not allowing the sanctioned goods to reach Russia was commended by the sanctions coordinators from the EU, the US, and the UK, who visited Georgia in June 2023. James O'Brien, the Head of the Office of Sanctions Coordination in the US, [said](#) that the Georgian government has done a “great job” in preventing the circumvention of sanctions.

The EU Sanctions Envoy David O'Sullivan also [noted](#) that while Georgia was not joining the EU's sanctions, the EU was “very satisfied with the systems of checking and monitoring which the Georgian authorities have put in place.”

Is Georgia Really Implementing the Sanctions?

One might ask if the Georgian government has implemented the sanctions, as it has claimed, and if the Western sanctions coordinators are commending Georgia, then why is there a perception that Georgia's stance on the sanctions is controver-

sial and positions the country as being in cahoots with Russia?

There are several major reasons for this.

First of all, the Government of Georgia, while claiming that they are effectively implementing all the sanctions, has not issued any formal legislation or decree that would instruct the relevant agencies to follow the sanctions. Compliance seems to be based on the political will of the authorities, which makes it impossible to scrutinize whether the sanctions are actually followed or not. If no laws or legal instruments exist, they cannot be broken; thus, legally, Georgia's position is sound-proof. However, the questions still remain.

Second, various independent investigations have raised questions about Georgia's compliance with EU sanctions. In 2023, the [New York Times](#) and [Deutsche Welle](#) ran pieces in which the transit of goods from Turkey to Russia via Georgia was described, and even though no concrete evidence was presented that Georgia was used for the transit of the sanctioned goods, the impression was given that the increase of trade between Turkey and Russia through Georgia implied the circumvention of sanctions. Indeed, the trade turnover between Georgia and Russia, as well as Turkey and Russia, increased after the Russian invasion. Common sense would suggest that such an increase happened to balance the imbal-

ance in trade that occurred because of the sanctions. However, no direct evidence was found either by the New York Times or other investigators. In fact, the New York Times also said that "it is impossible to tell how much of the European cargo crossing Georgia is subject to European Union sanctions."

Thus, a truck destined for Kyrgyzstan, which crosses the Georgia-Russia border, is technically not in violation of the sanctions; however, once it is on Russian territory, it is anyone's guess whether the goods stay in Russia or indeed go to Central Asia.

The reality is that, indeed, the trade turnover increased between Georgia and other neighboring states, including the countries of Central Asia. For instance, exports of goods from Georgia to Armenia amounted to USD 256 million in 2021. That number increased by 300% to USD 787 million in 2023. Exports to Kazakhstan amounted to USD 96 million in 2021, but in 2023, the number went up to USD 702 million (a 700% increase). Exports to Kyrgyzstan were a meager USD 30 million in 2021. In 2023, however, the number went up 23 times to USD 695 million. From a legal point of view, there is nothing wrong with the increase in trade with Central Asian countries. However, one must take into account that a lot of this transit goes through Russia. Thus, a truck destined

for Kyrgyzstan, which crosses the Georgia-Russia border, is technically not in violation of the sanctions; however, once it is on Russian territory, it is anyone's guess whether the goods stay in Russia or indeed go to Central Asia.

As for the export of cars to Russia, this declined dramatically in 2023, as noted above. However, the re-export of automobiles from Georgia reached a record high in 2023, increasing 4.7 times compared to 2021. One can easily conclude that this increase happened not because the Central Asian states suddenly started importing more but because the Russian demand for Western cars is now satisfied through re-routing trade via Georgia and the Central Asian states.

There is a third reason for the continued questions about Georgia's possible circumventing of the international sanctions. The Georgian Dream has shown that it takes a decision in favor of its political allies and not the international community's side when it and its associated circle are threatened with sanctions. For instance, in 2023, the National Bank of Georgia (NBG), under the leadership of the former Georgian Dream Economy Minister Natia Turnava, made a series of decisions that undermined compliance with the sanctions and the credibility of the National Bank.

On 18 September 2023, when news of

the sanctioning of Otar Partskhaladze (a Russian national turned former Prosecutor General of Georgia), described by the US government as "a Georgian-Russian oligarch whom the FSB has used to influence Georgian society and politics for the benefit of Russia," broke, the NBG promptly froze his accounts. A day later, Ms Turnava reversed the move and hastily amended the NBG's regulations, making it impossible to apply the sanctions to Georgian citizens without a prior court ruling. The move – allegedly aimed at allowing Mr Partskhaladze to rescue his assets – was preceded by a stream of statements by Georgian Dream leaders, including Party Chair and now Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, in defense of Mr Partskhaladze.

Such personal connections also explain why Georgia did not follow the EU in sanctioning those individuals who are related to the war or support the war directly or indirectly. One might wonder that, unlike joining the EU's economic sanctions, which could hurt Georgia's economy, the decision to sanction concrete individuals should have been easier for Georgia. However, the [leaked](#) phone conversations in 2022 showed that the links between Georgian oligarchs and Russian oligarchs are still there.

It turned out that Russian oligarch Vladimir Yevtushenkov is connected with Bidzina Ivanishvili and his associates, such as David Khidasheli, who previously held a

prominent role within the Russian communications company Sistema, owned by Yevtushenkov. Khidasheli's acknowledgment of Yevtushenkov as a friend further fuels suspicions of strong ties between Georgian officials and Russian oligarchs. Mr Khidasheli was involved in a major scandal before the 2020 elections when he spearheaded the campaign that the UNM government of Georgia "sold out" the important David Garedji monument to Azerbaijan, which led to a brief arrest of two former civil servants, but fueled the pre-election campaign of the Georgian Dream under the aegis – "Garedji is Georgia."

The previously mentioned leaked audio recording between Bidzina Ivanishvili and Vladimir Yevtushenkov showed that Ivanishvili easily redirected the Russian oligarch to the Prime Minister to discuss the topic of wheat trade in the heat of the European sanctions on the import and export of Russian goods.

The logic of "not joining but implementing" was seriously challenged when the Georgian government agreed to open the sky for Russian air carriers and resume direct flights.

Finally, the logic of "not joining but implementing" was seriously challenged when the Georgian government agreed to open the sky for Russian air carriers and re-

sume direct flights, which Moscow had suspended since the June 2020 anti-Russian protests. Before the summer of 2023, the Georgian sky was closed to Russian carriers for security reasons. When the flights resumed, Georgian authorities still claimed that they would not allow those carriers, which were banned by the EU, but would allow other companies. Very swiftly, new companies, also linked with Georgian businessmen, were created and are providing services to Russian air companies flying to Georgia.

The EU demarched this decision by the Georgian government but could not do much. The EU spokesperson Peter Stano stated that this decision "raises concerns in terms of Georgia's EU path and Georgia's commitments to align with the EU decisions in the foreign policy as foreseen in the EU Georgia Association Agreement." The fact that the EU could only refer to the Association Agreement shows that there was no other legal instrument on which the EU could draw. Indeed, the Georgian position that they cannot violate something they never signed stood once again.

Reasons Why Georgia is "Not Joining, but Implementing"

Georgia's nuanced stance of "not joining, but implementing" sanctions during the Ukraine-Russia conflict was driven by a combination of factors.

The Georgian Dream's fear of Russian repercussions, coupled with the animosity with the Ukrainian government, was probably the most important factor why Georgia chose the path of misalignment with the EU sanctions.

In addition, the Georgian Dream used the economic opportunities arising from Russia's sanctioning to boost the Georgian economy. Allowing Russian migrants, increasing transit through Georgia, and trade with Russia and the neighboring states boosted the Georgian economy and gave dividends to the Georgian Dream in the run-up to the 2024 electoral year. Georgia's GDP increased by 10.4% in 2022 and had a quarterly growth of 8%, 7.5%,

and 5/7%, respectively, in the first three quarters of 2023.

Georgian Dream government leveraged the Ukraine-Russia conflict for domestic political gain.

But most importantly, the Georgian Dream government leveraged the Ukraine-Russia conflict for domestic political gain. By adopting a stance that portrayed itself as a guardian of peace and stability, the government aimed to appeal to a significant portion of the Georgian population which favored a cautious approach towards Russia. This approach served to maintain its political support base and prevent potential domestic unrest.■

For Tbilisi, Kyiv Holds the Trio Key

EU Enlargement - Regional Approach in Action

All seven successful waves of the EU enlargement had a regional dimension. In 1973, Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom joined the European Community for the first Northern Enlargement. They were followed by the Southern/Mediterranean enlargement, with Greece (1981), Spain, and Portugal (1986) joining the community. After the end of the Cold War, the Community smoothly incorporated Finland, Austria, and Sweden in 1995, which, even though geographically distant, fit in the economic EFTA region. The Central and Eastern European 'big bang'

enlargement came in two waves, with the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia knitting ties with the European Union on the same day in May 2004 and Romania and Bulgaria joining in 2007. Croatia's EU accession in 2013 can be considered either the end of the Central and Eastern European enlargement or the start of the Balkan accession, depending on the point of view.

All past waves of enlargement clearly show that when it comes to the accession of the new member states, the regional approach prevails over that of the individual.



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The pause between the waves of enlargement varied from a minimum of three to a maximum of nine years. Now is the longest period (11 years) in EU enlargement history that the club has not enlarged. The Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), as well as Eastern Partnership's Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, are queuing up. All past waves of enlargement clearly show that when it comes to the accession of the new member states, the regional approach prevails over that of the individual, even if the EU's formal approach is based on the principle of individual merit.

This means that Georgia does not have much choice but to unite forces with other countries of the region in its European

quest. The key question is which ones.

Even though Türkiye and the EU have been engaged in accession negotiations with fits and starts since October 2005, the process has stalled after 2018, mainly due to the democratic backsliding in the country. It does not look like the accession process will be unfrozen anytime soon.

Armenia and Azerbaijan are also not the best partners for Georgia's European vocation. Azerbaijan pursues a multi-vector and balanced foreign policy strategy. The EU is Azerbaijan's leading trading partner, scoring first for exports and second for imports. However, strong trade links are not mirrored in politics as Azerbaijan does not seek EU membership.

Armenia, while having successfully [negotiated](#) the Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU, decided to stick with the Russian-led Customs Union in the end. On 3 September 2013, while visiting Putin in Moscow, then-President Serzh Sargsyan [announced a detour from the European course](#). The current Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is indeed more sympathetic to Armenia's European future, especially after Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh; however, whether Pashinyan will manage to make another U-turn away from Moscow to the EU is still anybody's guess.

The regional Association Trio's debut was promising, but Georgia has recently been drifting away.

Thus, short of alternatives in its immediate neighborhood, Georgia has little choice but to push engagement with other countries of the Black Sea region, like Ukraine and Moldova, which have the same foreign policy goals of EU membership. This was also reflected in Georgia's last Foreign Policy Strategy 2019-2022 (the new one has yet to be adopted). The document stressed the need to strengthen the trilateral cooperation between Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. The regional Association Trio's debut was promising, but Georgia has recently been drifting away.

Evolution of Trio Format

In December 2019, the civil society platforms of three associated countries signed the memorandum on cooperation that aimed to push the governments to establish regional cooperation among Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. The trio format got an endorsement from the European Parliament. The Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, co-chaired by Lithuanian MEP Andrius Kubilius in December 2019, adopted the [resolution](#) On the Future of the Trio Plus Strategy 2030: Building a Future of Eastern Partnership. Later, Kubilius and his cabinet published the [memo](#) stressing the need for EU institutions and the Member States "to come out with a much more ambitious agenda to provide a new momentum of EU integration process for the Association Trio."

In December 2019, the Foreign Ministers of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova issued a joint statement calling for the EU to introduce differentiation in the Eastern Partnership format. That statement also stressed that "considering the will of our people, we will consider applying for the EU membership in accordance with article 49 of the Treaty on European Union."

The Association Trio was officially inaugurated in May 2021 with the signature of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) in Kyiv between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and Georgia and the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova. The document referred to the right of three countries to apply for EU membership based on the EU Treaty article 49. The [memorandum](#) also set the modalities of cooperation by setting up the trilateral consultation formats, establishing Association Trio coordinators at MFAs, and holding regular Association Trio meetings at experts, senior civil servants, and minister levels. The memorandum put the main emphasis on cooperation between the Trio and EU but fell short of strengthening the trilateral cooperation among the countries. Three years after it was signed, little is known about how Trio countries apply MoUs in real life and how the existing modalities operate.

Afraid of Trio countries losing interest in the Eastern Partnership, the European External Action Service representative, commenting on the MoU signature, made a cautious [statement](#) - on the one hand, recognizing the fact of the signing of the memorandum but on the other hand, stressing that those countries need to focus on the implementation of the Association Agreements.

The cooperation on EU integration between the three countries was nothing new. It started even earlier among the legislative bodies of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In 2015, the three countries' Chairs of the EU and Foreign Affairs

Committees signed the joint [declaration](#) launching the Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation Initiative (IPCI). This cooperation deepened when, in June 2018, the Chairs of the Parliaments of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine signed an agreement to establish an inter-parliamentary assembly. The first session of the assembly took place in Tbilisi in 2018.

In July 2017, ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit, the three Parliaments sent a joint [statement](#) to the European Parliament calling it to “adopt a resolution before the EaP Summit reflecting political support and reaffirming the appeal to the European Council to opening the perspective of membership to the three Associated Countries in line with Article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union.” This was followed by a joint [communiqué](#) of senior members of the Parliaments of the three countries calling on the European Union to open the EU membership perspective.

The cooperation of the Trio countries gained further political weight once the Presidents of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, in the presence of the European Council President in the Georgian Black Sea city of Batumi, signed the declaration in July 2021 stressing that “accession to the European Union is a goal that unites three states” and that they “stand united in their determination to work towards achieving acknowledgment of the European perspective for Georgia, Moldova,

and Ukraine opening the way for future membership of three states in the EU.” It was the first [time](#) the European Council President mentioned the „Trio“ to describe the Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine cooperation format.

The Batumi meeting was followed by the online meeting of the three Trio Prime Ministers in November 2021, ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit in December 2021. Slowly but steadily, the EU also started to change its standing on the Trio. Ahead of the Summit, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, held a separate meeting with the Prime Ministers of the Trio countries. It followed the recognition of the Trio format by EU Member States. The EaP Summit [declaration](#) stressed that the “EU acknowledges the initiative of the Trio of associated partners Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, to enhance the cooperation with the EU, and takes good note of the increased coordination amongst them on matters of common interest related to the implementation of the Association Agreements and the DCFTAs, and on cooperation within the Eastern Partnership.”

Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought a new reality to the Trio format.

Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought a new reality to the Trio format. On 28 February

2022, Ukraine made a bold step by applying for EU membership. Georgia and the Republic of Moldova followed on 3 March 2022.

But just as the possibility of EU membership became real, the Trio format has wavered. On the one hand, the relations between official Tbilisi and Kyiv got increasingly strained in the context of Russia’s aggression. On the other hand, the diplomatic relations between Tbilisi and Chisinau remained low-key.

Kyiv’s position on Trio also changed as Ukrainians engaged in multi-dimensional resistance against Russia on the land, sea, air, and diplomatic fronts.

Kyiv’s position on Trio also changed as Ukrainians engaged in multi-dimensional resistance against Russia on the land, sea, air, and diplomatic fronts. Ukraine pushed for special treatment from Brussels at the expense of the earlier efforts to promote the regional format. The feeling has emerged that for Kyiv, the Trio was becoming an anchor that could weigh down Ukraine and keep it stuck in the EU waiting room, with underperforming Georgia and, to a lesser extent, Moldova.

Georgia-Ukraine Relations Undermine the Trio Format

After the United National Movement (UNM) lost power in Georgia in 2012, some

of the former officials went to Ukraine and were appointed to high political posts in Kyiv and Odesa. The now-ruling Georgian Dream party launched criminal investigations against many of them and demanded – unsuccessfully – their extradition from Ukraine. The harsh exchanges of the first years later softened, leading to the signing of the agreement in 2019 to establish a high-level strategic council of Ukraine and Georgia. The body aimed to cover four main areas: political, trade & economics, defense & security, and cultural & humanitarian. The working groups set up in each direction were to be led by the relevant ministers, ensuring a high level of comprehensive bilateral dialogue. However, this cooperation never took off.

The former President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, is the main apple of discord between Kyiv and Tbilisi.

The former President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, is the main apple of discord between Kyiv and Tbilisi. Saakashvili made an unusual move in 2016 – giving up Georgian citizenship in exchange for Ukraine becoming the governor of Ukraine's Odesa region. Wanted in Georgia for largely politically motivated charges, Saakashvili smuggled himself to the Georgian port of Poti in 2021, two days before the local elections. He was swiftly arrested, leading him to declare a hunger strike. The former President's health started to deteriorate, which prompted Georgian authori-

ties to move him to the prison hospital. In July 2023, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called on the Georgian authorities to transfer Saakashvili to Ukraine for necessary treatment and care. Zelenskyy's [words](#) – “right now, Russia is killing Ukrainian citizen Mykhailo Saakashvili at the hands of Georgian authorities,” show the depth of the problem.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 further spoiled Tbilisi-Kyiv relations. The war erased the shades of grey, leaving Georgia only two choices – either unequivocally and fully support Ukraine and condemn Russia's actions (something Kyiv expected) or side with Russia. The Georgian authorities tried to pursue a middle-ground pragmatic policy, supporting Ukraine diplomatically and through humanitarian actions but distancing from joining Western-imposed sanctions and military assistance. This policy was justified by the absence of security guarantees from the European Union or [NATO](#), putting Georgia at risk of Russian reprisals.

The rhetoric of then-Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, however, poured fuel on the fire. A few days after the invasion started, he promptly declared that Georgia would not join EU sanctions so as not to cause significant financial and economic damage to Georgia. He denounced the sanctions as ineffective and declared that there was nobody to stop

Russia from bombing [Kyiv](#). He also repeated Moscow's line that Ukraine's quest to join NATO was the reason for Russia's aggression. Even though Georgia provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, accepted and supported Ukrainian refugees, and joined diplomatic efforts and statements on Ukraine at various international fora, the political rhetorical support was muted.

The Georgian Government's rhetoric and mistreatment of Saakashvili resulted in Ukraine recalling its Ambassador from Georgia and expelling the Georgian Ambassador from Kyiv.

The Georgian Government's rhetoric and mistreatment of Saakashvili resulted in Ukraine recalling its Ambassador from Georgia and expelling the Georgian Ambassador from Kyiv. The Georgian side balked at this extreme escalation of diplomatic [relations](#) and held Ukraine responsible. Official Kyiv went further, accusing Georgia of aiding Russia to evade Western sanctions without presenting the evidence. The lack of evidence did not prevent Kyiv from blacklisting Georgian businessmen, including the ones closely affiliated with Bidzina Ivanishvili. Tbilisi's standing on "not joining, but also not violating" the Western sanctions was strengthened after the joint visit of EU, UK, and US sanctions envoys to Tbilisi in

June 2023. All three [stated](#) that the Georgia authorities were taking the necessary measures against sanction evasion.

The Georgian Prime Minister is among the very few leaders of Europe who have not visited Kyiv since the eruption of the war. He [claimed](#) that "going to Ukraine for the sake of going is useless." The ruling party imposed three preconditions for a high-level visit to Kyiv. Namely, Ukraine should bring back the Georgian ambassador to Kyiv, take back the allegations of Georgia aiding Russia to evade sanctions, and fire former Georgian officials from high positions in the government of Ukraine. The visit of the Georgian parliamentary delegation to Ukraine in April 2022, led by the Chair of the Parliament, remains the only physical manifestation of solidarity in official Georgia-Ukraine relations.

Despite deteriorating political ties between Ukraine and Georgia, trade relations were on the [rise](#) until 2022. After the signature of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with the EU, Ukraine and Georgia amended the bilateral trade agreement, paving the way for a functioning triangle of diagonal cumulative trade between the European Union, Ukraine, and Georgia.

Georgia-Ukraine trade in goods



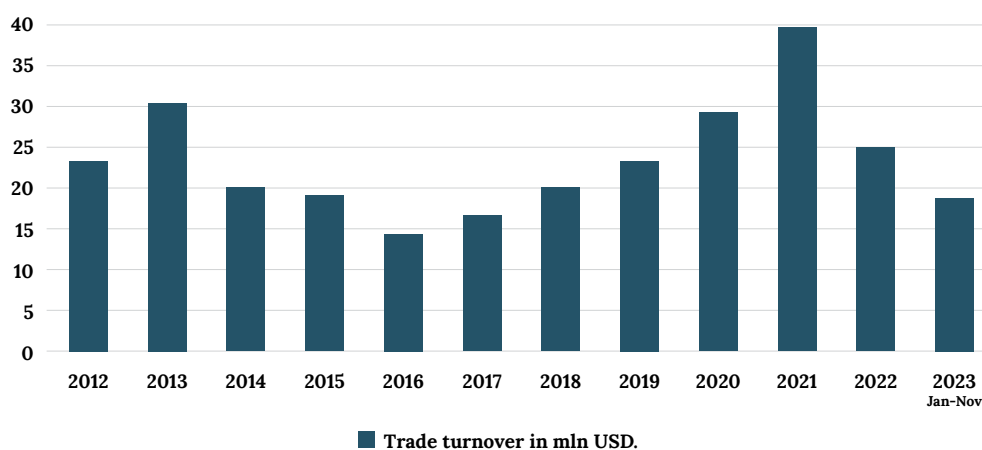
Georgia-Moldova Relations Do Not Help the Trio Format

Georgia-Moldovan relations can be characterized as a “No News” policy. Moldova is the only Eastern Partner country that does not have an Embassy in Tbilisi. Since 2012, the two countries have only exchanged high-level visits once - the Prime Minister of Georgia visited Chisinau in October 2018, and the President of Moldova visited Georgia in July 2021. These rather negligible political ties are also [reflected](#) in trade relations. The trade turnover figure (USD 238 million) between Moldova and Geor-

gia for almost 11 years (2012-2023) is far less than Georgia-Ukraine trade (USD 326 million) for January- November 2023.

Since the outbreak of the war, Moldova has stopped investing in the Trio format; instead, it is trying to support Ukraine in the war and bandwagon Ukraine into the EU. Moldovan support for Ukraine is far more significant than Georgia's. Since February 2022, Moldova received 852,548 Ukrainian refugees, and over 100.000 Ukrainian refugees chose to settle in the country as of November 2023. This made

Georgia-Moldova trade in goods



the poorest European country, with a population of just 2.5 million, the largest recipient of Ukrainian [refugees](#) per capita.

Just like Georgia, Moldova stated it would not join in the restrictive measures against Russia after Moscow's aggression in Ukraine. However, the political rhetoric and support drastically differed from Tbilisi's. Shortly after, however, Moldovan authorities reassessed their previous decisions and started implementing sanctions against Russia. As of November 2023, Moldova had joined four out of six sanction packages affecting citizens or legal entities from the Russian Federation. As Moldova's Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu [put](#) it: "There are still some sanctions packages that are being analyzed for their economic impact on Moldova. Our goal is to maintain the stability and security of our country. Absolutely all decisions on Moldova joining new sanctions are analyzed."

Trio Without an Engine

Coming up with a Trio format took a while and a great deal of effort. Diplomatic investment to get the Trio's recognition from the EU was also quite impressive. Initially, the main focus of the Trio was getting the European perspective and the right to EU membership rather than promoting internal political and economic cooperation between Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

It is in the core interest of Tbilisi to restart the Trio format.

Ukraine, the real engine of the Trio, lost interest in the format after the eruption of the full-scale war and the submission of its EU membership application. Kyiv does not see the Trio as having added value anymore. It tries to pave the way to EU membership independently rather than deliberately acting as a locomotive to drive Georgia and Moldova into the club.

Considering, on the one hand, the history of EU enlargement, where the regional approach prevails over the individual one, and the reality that none of Georgia's immediate neighbors aspire to go towards the EU, Georgia has little choice but to revitalize the Trio format. It is in the core interest of Tbilisi to restart the Trio format, but it can only happen if the bilateral problems with Kyiv are solved and the support for Ukraine matches Kyiv's expectations. Tbilisi has to get the key to the Trio engine in Kyiv; otherwise, it risks being cut off from the region and staying alone on the European integration path. ■

State Without Borders (and Identity): What Russia Loses by Losing Ukraine

The absence of Ukraine in the Russian state's fold challenges its very identity as an empire, as once [suggested](#) by the late Zbigniew Brzezinski. This notion unsettles many Russians who are uninterested in foreign policy. The Russian state's identity is closely tied to its imperial past, making the prospect of Russia without an empire deeply perplexing for its ruling elites and the general public.

Anticipating the eventual reclamation of currently occupied Ukrainian territories by Kyiv and the timing of such a recovery remains an uncertain prospect. Irrespec-

tive of the war's outcome, the abyss between Ukraine and Russia in the political, economic, and security spheres is unmistakable. This divide extends to history, culture, and faith, deeply impacting the national identities of both nations. Russia's loss of an empire due to the ongoing war with Ukraine signifies a significant transformation with many unknown consequences.

For Ukrainians, the aspiration to align with Europe has always been clear, with integration into European institutions being a declared priority for Kyiv. In contrast,



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Russians have grappled with the duality of their identity. Russian Empire's founder, Peter the Great, achieved his "greatness" by embracing Westernization. Conversely, another great ruler, Ivan the Terrible, the architect of the Muscovite Kingdom, earned his nickname through ruthless actions, characteristic of oriental rulers.

Russia's loss of Ukraine not only entails territorial and imperial consequences but also deals a blow to its self-identity.

During the debates between Russian Slavophiles and Westernizers about Ukrainian identity, the idea of Ukrainian independence was a distant possibility. Today, the

notion of "Little Russians," as assigned by Slavophiles to Ukrainian identity, is no longer acceptable for Ukrainians. Russia's loss of Ukraine not only entails territorial and imperial consequences but also deals a blow to its self-identity.

Quest for Identity

The formation of Russian national identity coincided with imperial expansion, blurring the lines between national and imperial interests. Russian identity became intertwined with imperial conquests, leaving little room for developing a distinct national identity, unlike other European nations.

Russian national identity absorbed the ethos of newly conquered territories, shaping the narratives of Russian and Ukrainian ethnic unity and the historical connection of Kyivan Rus to Russian history. Incorporating influences from the Mongols further complicated this narrative. The example of Alexander Nevsky, a key figure in Russian history who obeyed Golden Horde directives against European powers, illustrates this complexity.

The Russian Empire was not unique in lacking a clearly defined titular nation; the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires shared similar traits. The collapse of the imperial system post-World War I led to the disappearance of the Habsburg Empire and the establishment of a modern and secular Turkey by Kemal Ataturk. The Soviet Union, in contrast, evolved into a larger Soviet Empire, further blurring Russian identity. The Soviet Empire further reinforced the belief among Russian “patriots” in Russia’s divine mission on the European continent.

The Soviet Union’s collapse necessitated a redefinition of Russian identity, leading to constructs like the Commonwealth of Independent States, initially launched by three Slavic nations – Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. However, the newly invented concepts failed to rally former Soviet republics around Russia. New ideas such as “Rising from the Knees,” “Sovereign Democracy,” “Liberal Empire,” “Novoros-

sia,” “Russian World,” or “Spiritual Bonds” sought to redefine Russian identity and provide a new state ideology. The problem, however, is that most of the Russian neighbors, including Ukraine, profoundly disagree with any of the aforementioned common denominators, hence refusing to be “Russian.”

De-Europeanizing Political Culture

Although the Russian Empire was considered mainly a European Empire due to its projection of power in Europe, a European royal family, and a European facade, its governing style differed significantly from European traditions.

Often and unfairly, Russian governing models are called “horde-ish,” referring to the Mongol Golden Horde, which ruled on territories where today’s Russia and Ukraine are located. Andrei Illarionov, a prominent Russian economist, argues that the Russian political governing model is closer to a Sultanate than a more egalitarian Mongol system.

Boyars and Tsars of Muscovy, together with the Byzantine/Nordic governance model of the Kyivan Rus, could not effectively resist the Mongol invasion. Muscovy rulers learned the lesson and invented a fusion of Byzantine traditions (essentially Orthodox Christianity as a source of legitimacy for the Tsar) with governing and

military tactics borrowed from Muslim Khanates they conquered in the south. As Muscovy expanded to old Slavic territories and eventually turned into the Russian Empire, the same governance model was applied to the new territories, with expansion becoming the inherent part of a newly forged identity. As a renowned scholar of Russian/Soviet history, Richard Pipes once [noticed](#), “Russians have difficulty feeling Russian unless they rule others.”

Russian rulers felt that Russians needed to rule others to feel genuinely Russian.

Russian leaders found it convenient to adopt what Max Weber later called the patrimonial system, under which the tsar and his bureaucracy held all the power and subjects had no rights, only duties. The patrimonial systems strived only in the Russian and Ottoman Empires, both oriental in nature but nowhere else in Europe. Russian rulers felt that Russians needed to rule others to feel genuinely Russian.

Looking at today's Russia, it is evident that Putin's system is the purest form of Patrimonialism, where he and his bureaucracy have the power and ability to declare land and the people of the land in servitude to the state, depriving them of the right of independent existence. The “Putin equals

Russia” model is promoted daily by state propaganda, much like the Soviets promoted the “Lenin equals the Party” slogan.

This governance model was attempted in Ukraine in the 1990s but never worked. Public upheavals, such as the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan, highlighted the divergence between the Ukrainian and Russian governance systems and the attitudes of the two peoples to authoritarian rule. Even though plagued by corruption and inefficiencies, the Ukrainian system proved to be different from the Russian “Orthodox Sultanate.”

Religion, an Opioid in the Hands of the Rulers

The Russian Orthodox Church played a significant role in influencing large sections of the population. The “Moscow - the Third Rome” doctrine posited that the Moscow ruler was the universal ruler of Eastern Orthodox nations. This doctrine justified Russia's conquest of neighboring Christian nations, eradicating their autocephalous Orthodox Churches and imposing Russian Orthodoxy.

This formula was widely employed by Russia during the conquest of neighboring Christian nations (Ukraine and Georgia included), abolishing autocephalies of neighboring Orthodox Churches, eliminating the national church authorities,

and imposing the Russian Church as a determining institution for religious life.

The war in Ukraine led to the split of the Ukrainian Church from its Russian counterpart and the persecution of the Russian Church in Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church's alignment with invading forces resulted in bizarre displays of support, including [portraying](#) Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Putin on icons and blessing military equipment.

Even though Russia is primarily considered a state with a predominantly Orthodox Christian population, the number of non-Christian populations is rapidly [growing](#). Religious tolerance remains relevant only as long as it serves the Kremlin's goals. At the same time, regions like Chechnya already enforce their brand of the rule of law – a loose combination of the laws and constitution of Russia fused with the Shariah law. A quick look at the Northern Caucasus republics reveals a drastic [decrease](#) in the ethnic Russian/Slavic population in those republics, resulting in very little (if at all) influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. The same can be said about Siberia, where many Chinese-origin “new” Russian citizens do not care much about any religion.

Asian Geography with European People

While 23% of Russia is in continental Eu-

rope, 78% of its population resides there. The European part boasts the most developed infrastructure, including vital ports like Black Sea ports, Baltic Sea ports, and an Arctic Ocean port in Murmansk. These gateways to global maritime trade necessitate interaction with the West, yet Russia's political choices have skewed it toward the east.

Russia has historically sought to secure “access to the warm seas,” often framed as protecting Orthodox Christianity, a pretext used during the first Crimean War. Not much has changed in Russian political thinking; the new [“justification”](#) for invading Ukraine sounded like a historically tested thesis of “protection of the Russian-speaking population.”

For Russian decision-makers for centuries, a virtual line between St. Petersburg and Rostov-on-Don was a self-imposed defense line connecting Russia to the European Peninsula. Every time Russia had to defend that “line,” it was due to the military invasion of foreign armies, be it Napoleon or Hitler.

For the south, Russian ambitions extended as far as “liberating” Constantinople/Istanbul, requiring control of the North and South Caucasus on roughly several “defense” lines: the closest to the Russian heartland was the Sochi-Makhachkala line, while when Russia ruled the South

Caucasus, the Batumi-Baku line was an important threshold.

Russian expansionist military campaigns against Georgia and Ukraine pushed aside pretentious historical ideological or religious justifications, and occupation forces followed a geographic logic by creating the Sevastopol-Sokhumi line on the occupied territories of both countries.

The old Soviet joke, “Which countries does the Soviet Union have borders with? Whichever it chooses to,” has become one of the defining elements of the modern Russian political psyche and part of the Russian national identity.

Russia's games with geographic borders and the quest to deter NATO expansion through military campaigns have backfired. Sweden and Finland, two neighbors, have all but joined NATO, while Ukraine stands as Europe's first line of defense. The old Soviet joke, “Which countries does the Soviet Union have borders with? Whichever it chooses to,” has become one of the defining elements of the modern Russian political psyche and part of the Russian national identity.

It looks like Russia will continue treating geography as it has throughout history, but this time, as the former Prime Minister of Sweden Carl Bildt [noted](#), the profound hubris may yield different results.

Not Anymore the Second Best Military

The Ukrainian resistance has exposed the Russian military's vulnerabilities and dispelled myths about its strength as the second mightiest military in the world. The losses suffered by the Russian army in terms of personnel and equipment far outweigh any justifiable claimed gains. The failure of Russia's initial plans is most blatantly evident in Moscow procuring weaponry from Iran and North Korea to sustain the military effort.

Glorified on TV and cartoon-presented “superior” new Russian weapons are “the same old” with little “facelifts” and extras. Most of them were developed during the Soviet times but were ditched as unrealistic or undesired by those times. The “hypersonic” and “unstoppable” Kinzhal missiles are good examples. With the Cold War era Patriot system, Ukrainians managed to [down](#) six of them in one night. Their subsequent closer examination revealed that they were well-known Iskander missiles with modifications.

Specialists of the Soviet military industry often underlined that while theoretical developments of new weapon systems were always happening in Moscow, engineering was almost exclusively Ukrainian. Such a collaboration was still feasible and practiced before the war, but that ship had long left the harbor. Now, Ukrainian engi-

neers exhibit ingenious marvels on their own, adapting complex Western military systems to Soviet-era gear and “testing” them on Russian invaders.

The war further [exposed](#) that all modifications of Russian weaponry were based on electronic components from the West. While smuggling these components is still an option, the proper and scaled production of modernized systems is challenging, let alone considering exporting such systems.

As Ukrainians and Russians closely examine, adapt, and develop countermeasures for each other's tactics or weapon systems, the rest of the world is also watching and learning. Russian weapons are no longer seen as a desired product for acquisition. Even existing contracts cannot be fully executed due to a shortage of weaponry for the “special military operation,” as Russia labels the war.

At the same time, Chinese weapons, primarily based on Soviet prototypes, are substituting Russian military supplies, further shrinking Russian participation in the world gun trade. As per statistics [provided](#) by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia's portion of worldwide arms exports experienced a decline, dropping from 22% during the period from 2013 to 2017 to 16% from 2018 to 2022. When data for the period from 2023 to 2027 is released, SIPRI

estimates that it will reveal a significant and rapid decline in Russian arms exports.

Eastward-Looking Economy

Russia's economy has long relied on raw materials, with discussions about diversification ongoing since the Soviet Union's dissolution. After the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin anticipated that the West, heavily reliant on Russian energy resources, would eventually return to business as usual despite initial sanctions.

While in absolute numbers, the Russian economy might [look](#) “fine,” a closer examination reveals severe problems with the vector of economic development. Europe [was](#) the primary market for Russian hydrocarbons, corresponding to 45% of its natural gas supplies (155 billion cubic meters). Russia [was](#) also one of the largest suppliers of crude oil (108 million tons), oil products (91 million tons), and nearly 54 million tons of [coal](#), roughly half of European consumption. From today's perspective, Russia has [lost](#) at least half of its European market and will lose more.

Meanwhile, Russia's energy exports are diverted to Asia (mainly to China and India), where the price is very far from what the West would offer. For example, Russia is still [struggling](#) to convert USD 30 billion worth of INR (the result of selling oil to India with a significant discount in the local currency) into a more convenient [curren-](#)

cy. China is so far reluctant to finance a second line of the gas pipeline from Russia, called “Sila Sibiry” (Power of [Siberia](#)). The existing pipeline can transport only 15 bcm; ideally, it can reach 38 bcm by 2025. The price for supplied gas paid by China is significantly lower than what the EU countries would pay.

In a nutshell, the Chinese route of the gas trade cannot substitute or even get closer to what Russia has lost by cutting trade with Europe. Regaining trust in Europe will be difficult since trade routes are physically disrupted (exploded and unrepairable Nord Stream 2) or used for a reverse supply (part of the Druzhba pipeline through Ukraine). The same fate is shared by Russian airlines, trucking companies, and heavy industry, with the diamond industry in the queue. Products from China and other Oriental countries dominate the Russian market. Even secondary imports of sanctioned Russian goods mostly come from the east.

As a result of the war against Ukraine, the Russian economy will become further re-oriented to the east.

As a result of the war against Ukraine, the Russian economy will become further re-oriented to the east with increased dependence on the goodwill or good grace of not-so-democratic states with not-so-market [economies](#).

As British scholar James Sherr accurately observed, Russia is a scary country when viewed from Europe, but it is a declining power from an Asian point of view. Sanctioned by the West, Russian political leadership pivoted to the east, trying to find a sympathetic ear among the “enemies of the West.”

This collaboration, however, increasingly looks like the exploitation of Russian weaknesses for immediate economic benefits by squeezing as many commodity discounts and technologies as possible from sanctioned Russia. The main beneficiaries, like certain Gulf States, China, Turkey, and India, seized the momentum to maximize benefits before eventually risking becoming subjects of secondary Western sanctions.

Turkey now claims that it is having difficulties [banking](#) with Russia. India is [decreasing](#) its purchase of Russian oil due to “difficulties with the sanctioned fleet,” China is supportive verbally but very reluctant practically, and the UAE has started to [impose](#) restrictions on Russian capital. Only North Korea and, to a certain extent, Iran remain unconditional suppliers of military hardware to Russia amid the conflict – not very noble partners for an alleged superpower.

With its pivot to Asia, the Russian leadership is trying to position itself as a “defender of conservative values” allegedly abandoned by the Western leaders.

With its pivot to Asia, the Russian leadership is trying to position itself as a “defender of conservative values” allegedly abandoned by the Western leaders. A lot of emphasis is being placed on anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric and family values. Almost every month, new scandals [erupt](#) in the West, exposing Russian attempts at cybercrimes, interference in elections, espionage, or just brutal assassinations. Ironically, a big part of the Russian population is concurring with its government's efforts to be a “spoiler” and a “bad guy,” yet another confusing threat to the unformed national identity.

Putin's and his circle's spite for the West is grounded not on “too many cheats and unfulfilled promises” as alleged by the Russian leadership but on the nature of the Russian state with robust features of Patrimonialism, unacceptable and incomprehensible for liberal democracies. Putin may temporarily feel welcomed by the Eastern powers, but eventually, he will drive Russia into servitude to the China-dominated east.

It looks like Russia's war against Ukraine and the West is turning Russia into a “sick man of Asia.”

In 1853, Russian Tsar Nicholas I called the Ottoman Empire a “sick man of Europe,” a term widely used to describe the demise and crumbling of a once-great power. It looks like Russia's war against Ukraine and the West is turning Russia into a “sick man of Asia.”

Implications for Georgia

Russia's transformation into a “sick man of Asia” also holds consequences for Georgia. A more European Russia would offer a cooperative partner for discussions, while “Asian Russia” would impose its governance, economy, security, and religious values on its periphery.

Georgia's political system mirrors Russia's patrimonial model, with a single individual and their cronies exercising total control. However, Georgia's Orthodox Church still wields influence, differentiating it from Russia. Further Russian influence will also damage the Church's authority and isolate it from mainstream European Orthodox autocephalies.

As Russia distances itself from the West, Georgia's efforts to follow or pivot toward China are short-sighted and contradict its declared national interests.

As Russia distances itself from the West, Georgia's efforts to follow or pivot toward China are shortsighted and contradict its

declared national interests. At this stage, Georgia's alignment with China remains mostly talk. While the Georgian government may try to mimic Russia in this regard, China cannot offer the economic, political, and security benefits the EU/NATO integration can, no matter how many strategic documents the two countries co-sign. Therefore, for the Georgian government, there is no real alternative to the EU and NATO integration.

Further, the EU remains the only stable and predictable market for Georgia, similar to what the EU was for Russia. Despite Georgia's increasing [trade](#) with Russia, the Russian market will always be volatile for Georgian exports, and if Georgian companies want to find markets in Asia, they must do so without Russian intermediaries and Moscow's support.

Short-sighted and short-lived economic benefits caused by the influx of Russian capital and people due to the invasion of Ukraine exhausted themselves and most likely will instigate the reverse effect. Already, more Russians [left](#) Georgia than entered in 2023.

If Georgia remains over-dependent on hostile Russia, it will risk undermining the full realization of Georgia's valuable transit potential from east to west and potentially from south to north – a possibility that might have a new window of opportunity after the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue by Azerbaijan. Attempts to align with Beijing might not help.

If Russia remains confused about its identity and state borders, Georgia will remain in the dangerous zone as long as it is not adequately integrated into the EU and NATO. "Confused" Asia-leaning Russia will eventually be circling a Sino-centric orbit. Therefore, the fundamental down-the-road decision for Georgia will be either a part of the Western world or the Sino-Soviet world with corresponding governance systems, economic models, and value systems.

Georgia's history and firm European identity provide a straightforward answer to this question – the EU over Russia and the West over the East.■

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