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Our Mission

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

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

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



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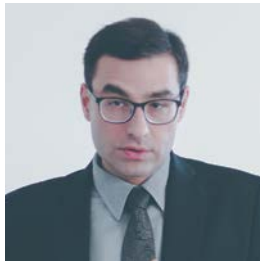
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Only NATO's Protective Shield Can Stop the Russian Bowling Ball

Just as a protective barrier shields the bowling pins from the ball on a perfect collision course toward an inescapable strike, only NATO can secure countries like Ukraine and Georgia from ongoing and future Russian aggressions. The end of the Second World War stirred the pan-European debate on how to avoid future wars at all costs; when the current war, deadliest since WW2, ends, similar debates will be inevitable. This time, the question must be – how to ensure that Russia never again attacks its neighbors.

The answer to this question is in security guarantees, whether multilateral or bilateral, provided by the most powerful to the weakest or by many to the most vulnerable. In the current international security architecture, the only guarantor of such stability and security is NATO.

This volume is centered around the idea of security guarantees and foreign policy choices of the states (stuck) between Russia and the West.

Temuri Yakobashvili emphasizes the concept of political “belts,” which often form around the empires, and “ropes,” which knit together post-imperial nations. He argues that tied with similar ropes, Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova must react to the tightening geopolitical belt around Russia and cooperate strategically by reinvigorating the GUAM framework, which has been dormant due to political contradictions and other internal issues. By walking such a tightrope away from Russia and towards the West, these countries can secure their future and survival.

Jaba Devdariani follows up with the analysis of various strategies for security assurances, ranging from multilateral military alliances like NATO to bilateral agreements and regional partnerships. The article scrutinizes the experiences of Ukraine, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, illustrating that Ukraine's reliance on soft multilateral security guarantees and bilateral agreements exposes vulnerabilities, while Armenia's partnership with Russia highlights the risks of depending solely on a dominant neighbor. In contrast, Azerbaijan's alliance with Türkiye demonstrates the effectiveness of this peculiar ethnic kin-state partnership. The article critically assesses Georgia's approach, highlighting the country's precarious position and “strategic patience” towards Russia while staying passive in enhancing defensive capabilities and pursuing NATO membership.

Shota Gvineria strengthens the argument that there is no better security guarantee for Georgia than NATO; however, the integration path has stalled in contrast to pragmatic cooperation, which has stayed on course despite frozen membership prospects. Now, more than ever, in light of tremendous security challenges, Georgia could be granted the Membership Action Plan (MAP), especially since MAP has lost the political importance it had back in 2008. Granting the MAP would also open doors for discussions on the modalities and timeframe of Georgia's accession, which could serve as a ground for creative discussions on the partial, non-military application of Article 5 to the occupied regions of Georgia, addressing concerns from some NATO members.

Thorniké Gordadze, in turn, looks at how Armenia, Russia's disgruntled ally, is pivoting to the West, knocking on the EU's door while seeking better alternatives than Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization. Strategic steps by the West are necessary to solidify Armenia's alignment with Western institutions and enhance its resilience amid geopolitical uncertainties. Additionally, closer economic links with the EU, the opening of connectivity, reestablishing peaceful ties with the neighbors, and the EU granting visa-free movement to Armenian citizens could bolster Armenia's reorientation from Moscow. But these steps need to be taken carefully, as potential challenges and countermeasures from Russia must be anticipated.

Sergi Kapanadze then analyzes the year ahead of the freshly minted EU candidate state, Georgia, and argues that the EU has all but relinquished its leverage over the Georgian Dream's government after the decision to grant it candidate status despite the unfulfilled reforms. Not all is lost, however, despite the unpredictable election year. Clear articulation of expectations, increased rhetorical and high-level pressure, strictness on the implementation of EU conditionalities, and particular emphasis on free and fair elections could still reinvigorate the EU's leverage over Georgia, incentivizing the Government to undertake

reforms and rearming Georgia's pro-European civil society against increasingly vulnerable Georgian Dream which counts on another geopolitical act of kindness from the EU.

Finally, Vano Chkhikvadze offers a comprehensive overview of the European Political Community (EPC) and its evolution in response to changing geopolitical dynamics and security challenges in Europe. He examines the heterogeneous composition of the EPC, comprising EU member states, European states not seeking EU membership, and states aspiring to join the EU, and discusses the achievements and challenges of the EPC, as well as its future prospects and challenges, such as possible non-participation by European leaders. It is clear that the EPC needs to fill its meetings with concrete proposals and content, and in this context, Georgia can offer fresh ideas, including the hosting of the EPC summit in 2025.

In summary, while many ideas can be floated on how to make the Eastern Partnership states more stable, prosperous, and resilient through European integration or pan-European and regional endeavors, the bottom line is well-summed up by Thorniké Gordadze when analyzing Armenia's pivot to the West – Security First !

With Respect,
Editorial Team

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Belt and Rope

Political scientists tend to find natural science jargon applicable and helpful in describing events and processes in its domain. Concepts like “tectonic shift” or “fault lines” not only refer to earthquakes but to political events as well. While atmospheric climate change and its consequences are hotly debated political issues, political climates and atmospheres are no less discussed, affecting billions of people’s lives. In atmospheric climate change, the dominance of the human factor is still disputed, although political climates are 100% man-made.

The same is true for Georgia’s foreign policy. Georgia is at the “fault line” of international politics; the August 2008 Georgia-Russia war indeed caused “tectonic shifts” in the region, and the bloody events of 9 April 1989 started the “perfect storm” that precipitated the demise of the Soviet Union. While those events took place in Georgia, they resulted from a certain international political climate, which also affected Georgian society and territory.

Any political climate is not only man-made but is also always influenced by external factors (like any

climate). For small countries like Georgia, external factors play a disproportionately exuberant role. Examining these external factors can be instrumental in understanding what options are feasible for Georgia’s political, economic, and security policies and what can/should be done to achieve these strategic policy goals.

Political Climate Around Georgia

Several factors determine today’s international political climate around Georgia. First of all, it is the Russian revisionist policy in the neighborhood resulting in military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine and the occupation of approximately 20% of the land of both countries. In parallel, the long-lasting leader of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, changed the core nature of the Turkish state and its projection of power around it. One can credit such a policy to Azerbaijan’s ability to regain Nagorno-Karabakh and solve the decades-long territorial conflict with Armenia. This fact causes understandable envy among those who have similar problems with secessionist and occupied regions.



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Expanding EU and NATO into the former Eastern Bloc and Baltic countries created a powerful magnet for the populations of Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. As a result, three countries strongly gravitated towards the EU, and two of them towards NATO, Georgia included in both cases.

Expanding EU and NATO into the former Eastern Bloc and Baltic countries created a powerful magnet for the populations of Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia.

Chinese influence has also been dramatically growing but has not yet materialized in any noteworthy political or economic gravitas. Even though Iranian influence is spreading in the Middle East, its leadership mainly avoids the so-called “Russian periphery,” with sporadic exceptions of Azerbaijan (ethnic Azerbaijanis are a formidable factor inside Iran) and Armenia, with whom Iran has a narrow

land border. Washington looks at the Black Sea and the Caucasus mainly through the prism of the Ukrainian-Russian war with little residual factors like the war against terrorism (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq), energy policies (diversification of hydrocarbon supplies from the Caspian basin), and increasingly fading efforts to spread democracy and good governance.

About a Belt

It is easily observable that similar political and economic climates proliferate in homogeneous environments. Sometimes, it takes the shape of a big chunk of adjacent territories that stretches like a strip, forming a kind of “belt.” The “Rust Belt” in the US is a conglomerate of former industrial powerhouse states that declined due to a change in an “economic climate” where misery and crime have replaced economic growth. The “Rust Belt” (and allegedly the invention of the air-conditioner) caused the creation of the “Sun Belt,” where

most of the industrial labor immigrated and found economic prosperity. Unlike an economic “belt,” the late Henry Kissinger introduced the notion of the “Shia Belt,” a political/ideological/religious “belt” encompassing Muslim states with a significant Shia population (Iran, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon), also known as the “Shia Crescent.” The Chinese “Belt and Road Initiative” incorporates both economic and political factors in its calculus to promote infrastructure development and revitalize the Silk Road. When the European Union launched the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004, it also thought in terms of a belt of states adjacent to the newly enlarged EU, from Belarus down to the Middle East and all the way to Morocco through Northern Africa.

Feeling uncomfortable under imposed rules, Georgians often rebelled and never wasted an opportunity to get out of the “belt” by hitting below the oppressors’ belts.

Historically, on the peripheries of various empires, Georgia often found itself as a part of a “belt” circling the furthest outposts of a given empire. Feeling uncomfortable under imposed rules, Georgians often rebelled and never wasted an opportunity to get out of the “belt” by hitting below the oppressors’ belts. An independent Georgia found a chance to choose in what kind of a “belt” its national interests could be better protected. The proliferation of security, political stability, and economic prosperity among new members of the EU and NATO made Georgia’s choice obvious. At the same time, Georgia, together with Moldova, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan, found itself in a non-voluntary belt, dividing NATO/EU and CSTO/Eurasian Economic Union. It is an uncomfortable area that Russia calls its exclusive sphere of interest and challenges militarily as a battleground for revising the world order.

About a Rope

Many of Russia’s neighbors took the “my hands are tied” stance after the collapse of the Soviet Union, implying the existence of limited or no geopolitical choice. Invisible or visible ropes intertwined the economies and political systems of the former Soviet states, even after they regained their independence. Russian military influence still extended beyond Russian borders, and economic levers were more than enough to exert pressure. Where these means did not work, ethnic and territorial conflicts were instrumentalized.

Most importantly, decolonization from the Russian/Soviet empire was (and still is) taking place in the areas geographically adjacent to the former metropole, unlike in the cases of other European empires whose colonies were overseas. This geographic proximity produced rudimentary ropes, knitting the former empire together and making its rupture more difficult. Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan found themselves (stuck) between the European and Euro-Atlantic world to the west and the Russian World (Russkii Mir) to the north and east. Bound together with the invisible post-imperial links, they started walking a tight rope westward with fits and starts, hanging in the air, holding on to each other and the ropes that bound them, hoping to finally reach and ground themselves in the global West. Very soon, all four of them found out that political, economic, and security “tightrope walking” requires not just enormous strength and mastery but, most importantly – full cooperation and a permissive international climate.

Region vs. Neighborhood

The most conducive climate for the cooperation of Eastern Partnership and South Caucasus States would be the accelerated integration into the European and Transatlantic institutions. Previous en-

largements have seen countries aligning regionally, like the Visegrad, Baltic, or Nordic groups. Many European allies naively expected the same model from the three countries of the South Caucasus. However, the South Caucasus is not really a political region due to the divergent political, economic, or cultural/religious affinities. While Georgia aspires towards Western integration (EU, NATO), Azerbaijan's cooperation with the West is more of an "à la carte" type rather than the "preset menu," cherry-picking the areas of mutual interest (like energy, transportation, etc.). Azerbaijan is also in a military alliance with a NATO member (Türkiye) and is a part of the Non-Alignment Movement and the Organization of Islamic States. Until now, Armenia has been firmly embedded in Russo-centric political, economic, and cultural establishments (CSTO, Eurasian Economic Union), even though Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has recently been trying to change the country's course.

As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once said: "Love does not consist of gazing at each other but looking outward together in the same direction." Countries of the South Caucasus certainly do not look outward in the same direction, with one looking west (US and EU), one north (Russia), and one south (Türkiye/Islamic world), and probably through the peripheral vision, all looking to the east at China. It is not a pleasant vision for a political region.

Meanwhile, the regional powers neighboring the South Caucasus treat the region for what it is – the neighborhood. Russia calls the region the "near abroad," the EU calls it the "eastern neighborhood," and for Türkiye, it is part of the Black Sea neighborhood and a gate to the Turkic-speaking nations in the North Caucasus and Central Asia. Countries of the region also behave towards each other in the same manner as "normal neighbors" – sometimes quarreling, sometimes cooperating, and eventually finding ways of coexistence and cooperation.

Gentrification of the Region

Prosperous neighbors make an affluent neighborhood. Unlike traditional gentrification, in political "gentrification," you do not need to resettle aboriginal dwellers; instead, you make their presence more valuable to other neighbors, increasing the value of the entire neighborhood. Georgia's transformation from a "country of bribes and tribes" into a mostly corruption-free country affected and encouraged its neighbors. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and other regional countries today pride themselves in corruption-free, one-stop public service centers modeled after Georgia's public service halls.

Prosperity and stability have spill-over effects in the neighboring states and regions.

Prosperity and stability have spill-over effects in the neighboring states and regions. When Georgia dropped the visa requirements for citizens of Russia in 2010, residents of the Northern Caucasus very soon rediscovered their immediate neighborhood in the south, which for centuries has served as one of the centers for the education and incubation of their national elites.

When Azerbaijan and Georgia agreed to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project in the late 1990s, creating the infrastructure to deliver Azerbaijani oil and gas to Europe, economic prosperity and stability of the region and pragmatic friendly relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan also grew, attracting investments and leading to the increased trade and other infrastructure projects, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway.

For years, the permissive, corruption-free environment in Georgia was utilized by the Central Asian and South Caucasus states to re-export cars and equipment from Georgia, leading to the ex-

port of cars becoming the major export item for Georgia. With current economic sanctions against Russia, Central Asian countries find it increasingly attractive to use transportation corridors through the Caucasus, relying heavily on the Georgian Black Sea ports.

By the same token, if Georgia manages to build the deep sea Anaklia port and Azerbaijan and Armenia agree to open connectivity routes through the Caucasus, the spill-over effect in the wider region will be tremendous and long-lasting.

“The Mission Determines the Coalition”

These famous words of the late Donald Rumsfeld, former US Secretary of Defense, remain very relevant for Georgia's choices. For Georgia to become a desired and valuable neighbor, it must achieve its national objective to become a member of the EU and NATO. In this quest, the obvious coalition partners are Ukraine and Moldova. The value that Georgia can bring to the EU and NATO derives from its geography, transit potential, energy security, and genuinely good relations with the countries to its east and south.

Eventually, it will be a two-way street – democratic, prosperous, and stable Georgia, which is an EU and NATO member, will be a much-preferred partner for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Central Asian countries, and even China. The same is true for the Middle Eastern powers whose investments in Georgia have followed the trajectory of democracy in Georgia.

If the political and intellectual sages of the region were to go back to the drawing board, they would easily arrive at an institutional construct that still somehow exists, headquartered in Kyiv, consisting of most of the countries interested in a political or economic coalition with Georgia. Such an organi-

zation is GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), which was created in 1997 with an aim to counter Russia's influence in its neighborhood; however, the decades of bumpy relations among its members, as well as out-of-sync governments and their foreign policy priorities, relegated GUAM to the back of priority organizations for all members.

Now might be high time to think about revitalizing GUAM with a new mission and proactive programs in practical dimensions. Undoubtedly, the GUAM-2 can be relevant only after the war between Russia and Ukraine ends. Nevertheless, deliberation on the shape of such a project's future can start right now.

Now might be high time to think about revitalizing GUAM with a new mission and proactive programs in practical dimensions.

Undoubtedly, a major determining factor for the renewed GUAM framework will be related to how the war ends. Nevertheless, essential aspects of reinvigorated cooperation can be elaborated by experts from all interested sides and NATO and EU allies. Even if most or some of the GUAM-2 members end up in the EU and NATO, valuable forms of cooperation could be reinforced, not substituted; hence, such an endeavor could have a longer life span than any ad hoc arrangement.

After the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian political leadership started a re-evaluation of its strategic partnership with Russia, as Thorniké Gordadze explains in this volume. More efforts to reach a peace agreement with Azerbaijan, normalize its relationship with Türkiye, and accelerate collaboration with the West are not only visible but may bring fruits as well. If that happens, Armenia may find the idea of joining GUAM-2 quite compelling.

Developments in Belarus may not give a lot of hope, but the discontent of the population not-so-long-ago and increasing dependence on weakening Russia may eventually result in some kind of regime change, and Belarus, too, may find it more attractive to be in a GUAM-2 type political clubs.

In any case, at this moment, for all neighbors of Russia, one thing must be clear: as long as the leader of Russia, Vladimir Putin, feels like a superman in the driving seat, none of his neighbors have the luxury of feeling safe because, as Muhammad Ali once said: "Superman don't need no seat belt!"

The Soviet Union had already tried to catch up with the West and "surpass" it while simultaneously portraying that the West was heading to the edge of a cliff. Everyone remembers how that race ended. Putin's recent reckless thrust to again outmaneuver the West is already costing dearly to everybody around and in Russia. With this policy, Russia is steadily pushing itself into Chinese servitude and off another cliff. It is highly doubtful

that other countries of the former Soviet Union, including the Central Asian states, want to follow Russia into China's orbit. This is why five Central Asian states are attempting to form a regional co-operation mechanism. It might be time to think of the same approach in the European neighborhood of Russia.

It is highly doubtful that other countries of the former Soviet Union, including the Central Asian states, want to follow Russia into China's orbit.

One thing is clear: whatever crazy military or political strategies Russian leaders may conceive, a new geopolitical belt is tightening around Russia. It seems that the neighboring nations have already tested their ropes and gained valuable experience, akin to Franklin D. Roosevelt's wise counsel: "When you reach the end of your rope, tie a knot in it and hang on" ■

No Place to Lay His Head: Dilemma of Alliances in the State of War

“Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

Luke 9:58

Europe is struck by war, the type it never expected to re-occur, the one with water-filled trenches, artillery duels, thousands of soldiers dead, countless civilians massacred, with wholesale, wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure and the aggressor's express intent to end the sovereignty of one of Europe's largest states. For the politicians, this reality is impossible to ignore, even as those geographically farthest from the scene of hostilities try to reassure their populations. But those closer to the flaming fault line are spurred by their people to do something, to act, to make sure that a similar fate does not befall their cities and their children. The idea of military alliances and bilateral or multilateral security assurances, which to many in Europe seemed a vestige of the barbaric 20th century, is back in vogue.

But which kind of military alliances and security assurances can be counted on to provide security in the current circumstances? What good are bilateral alliances? And what are Georgia's options?

The Golden Standard

A multilateral military alliance underpinned by nuclear-capable states is the golden standard of security assurance. No wonder Finland and Sweden – the two countries that, incidentally, continued to invest in defense and security through the fat and calm European 1980s and 1990s – went for the ultimate umbrella of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).



JABA DEVDARIANI
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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.



A multilateral military alliance underpinned by nuclear-capable states is the golden standard of security assurance.

But this option is not for everyone; it requires military readiness, democratic virtue, and an appropriate opportunity. Both Finland and Sweden have invested in interoperability with other NATO states for decades. They have potent military forces and a military-industrial complex that makes their membership a net asset for the Alliance. They are contiguous to the NATO states and defensible militarily. And crucially, they are above all doubt when it comes to the democratic credentials and stability of their institutions. Also, quite importantly, a significant portion of their populations is mentally prepared to accept both the possibility of war and that averting it requires a concerted effort of the state and its citizens – both as individuals and members of other organizations, including businesses.

Yet, as we have all witnessed, even for those two countries, the road to the alliance has not been without a hitch. Türkiye and Hungary have used the critical moment to extract political and security concessions, adding the element of acrimony and mistrust to the NATO family at the very moment when unity was of the essence. Still, the flags of Sweden and Finland are proudly flying in front of the NATO Brussels headquarters, despite these complications.

A “Gold Plus” Option

For the countries that are too close to the aggressor and the perimeter of war, even NATO membership per se is not sufficiently reassuring. Considerably smaller than Finland by population, GDP, and [military capability](#), Lithuania opted to complement its multilateral shield with [a bilateral deal with Germany](#) to station a full-size brigade on its soil by 2027. This marks the first time since the end

of WWII that Berlin will be permanently stationing the troops abroad. It is also a qualitatively significant upgrade from the NATO-led deployments of the Western European “tripwire” military forces along the Eastern edge of the Alliance. But even those have grown: France’s NATO battle group in Romania is already 800-strong and includes its Rafale fighters.

For the countries that are too close to the aggressor and the perimeter of war, even NATO membership per se is not sufficiently reassuring.

Both Lithuania and Romania fall into the group of countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Bulgaria that want to see their military capabilities supercharged quickly but still are becoming painfully aware that without an external military presence and tangible security guarantees, they may become a tempting target for the Kremlin if it decides to test the validity of NATO’s Article 5 commitment on mutual defense.

In the Thick of It

While the current NATO members and those with discernible avenues towards the membership seek to enhance their defenses, the condition of those states that have no immediate prospects of getting under the collective defense umbrella is more fraught. The Russian saying goes that penury is rich in inventions. What are the tactics that Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are deploying to bridge their security concerns?

Ukraine: Learning Hard Lessons

Ukraine is, on the face of it, a textbook cautionary tale against “soft” multilateral security guarantees, even if they look ironclad. At the time when

the USSR dissolved, Ukraine was a nuclear-armed state with strategic aviation, tactical nuclear missiles, and a navy in its arsenal. Kyiv gave them up in exchange for joint security guarantees from the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

Under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the three major powers [undertook](#) an “obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self-defense or otherwise in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.” Not only has Russia blatantly violated its solemn obligation – twice – but the other two parties discovered that they had no serious leverage against Russia bestowed by the Memorandum. The text spoke only of the obligation “to seek immediate United Nations Security Council action,” which, in case of aggression by the Security Council member, had come to naught.

But Ukraine is also a case in point for security flip-flopping. It started out its independent statehood with military neutrality. A brief stint after the “Orange Revolution,” when Kyiv sought to shelter under the NATO umbrella, resulted in 2008 “non-admission admission” in the [Bucharest Memorandum](#) that Ukraine (and Georgia) “will become members of NATO.” Another stint of non-alignment followed in 2010–2014, ending with the first Russian invasion, occupation of the part of Donbas, and annexation of Crimea. The new security strategy of 2020 renewed the NATO membership objective, but the Russian invasion of 2022 made membership impossible, despite the affirmation of the membership perspective by the NATO allies at the 2023 Vilnius Summit.

This history presents Ukraine with a bit of a dilemma: considering the fate of the Budapest Memorandum, what kind of bilateral guarantees may address its security predicament?

The Agreement on Security Co-Operation between the UK and Ukraine [provides a glimpse](#) of the current effort, as well as its limits. The agreement contains lofty phrases about “working towards a hundred-year partnership,” but its practical side is encapsulated in article four of the part on defense and military cooperation, where the UK pledges “to ensure Ukrainian Armed Forces and security forces are able to fully restore Ukraine’s territorial integrity [...] as well as to increase Ukraine’s resilience so that it is sufficient to deter and defend against future attacks and coercion.” (Part II, Art. 4)

The arrangement is, therefore, premised on the proven capability of the Ukrainian armed forces to defend their homeland and seeks to enhance its deterrence capability.

This sounds less comprehensive than the “unequivocal guarantee” [offered](#) by the UK and France to Poland in 1939 to “lend the Polish Government all support in their power.”

Yet, the historical context is vitally important here. Obviously, the “unequivocal” 1939 guarantee, even if it was hailed as a revolutionary departure from the British foreign policy of limited commitments since Versailles, could not save Poland. What is more, this commitment became a formal cause of Britain declaring a state of war with Germany. The repetition of a similar situation in the nuclear era is something that all nuclear-capable powers would want to avoid at any cost.

Consequently, the 2023 UK agreement with Ukraine is different in its substantive and temporal scope: it is premised on bolstering Ukraine’s current determination to resist and has a short-term security objective to ensure deterrence. Kyiv signed similar agreements also with France and Germany.

The document signed with France guarantees “global assistance” to help re-establish territorial

integrity, economic recovery, and reconstruction. It also offers “prevention, active dissuasion and all other measures” against “any new aggression” from Russia. Similarly, [the agreement](#) with Germany pledges “unwavering support” to Ukraine’s ability to defend itself, restore territorial integrity, secure freedom, and relaunch the economy. Germany and France both committed to providing long-term military support, training, and equipping Ukrainian troops. Importantly, neither pledged direct support to NATO membership: while an agreement with France pledges “support to Euro-Atlantic integration,” it specifies “interoperability” with NATO. The Agreement with Germany has no such provision.

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Simply put, Ukraine is given external help to survive the current onslaught on its own and to retain the deterrent capabilities with military force integrated with that of the allies once the current hostilities end.

Armenia: Limits of Confidence

Armenia, until recently, has been a net consumer of “Gold Plus” security assurance from the other side – from Russia. Yerevan is a member of NATO’s Russia-led *doppelganger* – the [1992 agreement](#) of the Collective Security Treaty Organizations (CSTO), which bounds its members to treat aggression towards one as aggression towards all (Article 4). On top of that guarantee, Armenia has well-established bilateral military procurement treaties with Russia and, since 1995, has stationed the Russian 102nd Military Base in Gyumri.

Yet, what seemed like an ironclad commitment collapsed once Azerbaijan undertook in 2020 and 2023 successful operations to reclaim Nagorno-Karabakh – an Armenian-populated enclave that de-facto seceded from Azerbaijan in the 1990s with Yerevan’s backing. As Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was ongoing, Azerbaijan completed the takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, the local administration [ceased to exist](#), most inhabitants fled, and senior Armenian political officials were arrested.

Even though Yerevan [triggered](#) the CSTO mutual defense mechanism, Russia clung to the fact that Karabakh was not Armenian sovereign territory and thus nullified the CSTO security guarantee. Armenia [boycotted](#) the CSTO meetings, even though it is [hesitating](#) about quitting it altogether, probably afraid to remove the only remaining obstacle to Azerbaijan’s further intervention. Yerevan finds itself still bound to Russia economically and has committed to [keep hosting the Gyumri base](#) till 2044 but draws little strategic benefit from the Russian military presence.

Armenia offers a cautionary tale of a small country entering into a lock-step security partnership that collapses under the weight of circumstances beyond its control.

Armenia offers a cautionary tale of a small country entering into a lock-step security partnership that collapses under the weight of circumstances beyond its control. The mitigating actions, such as [a military agreement with France](#) or a “strategic partnership” agreement [with Georgia](#), are of limited value despite the high-flying rhetoric and [disproportional irritation](#) from Baku. Pashinyan is at the mercy of the victors.

Azerbaijan: Kin State Alliance

An outlier in Russia's neighborhood, Azerbaijan has pursued the type of security umbrella that pre-dates modern military alliances – with a neighboring ethnic kin state. Since 1992, when Baku signed a military and security agreement with Ankara, the two states gradually established intertwined security and military structures, as well as a joint military industry. The cooperation expanded in the context of partnership on oil and gas projects, also involving Georgia since 2012.

In 2013, Baku and Ankara [penned the](#) Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance, which contains the classical military assistance clause. Rather than engaging in consultations, Article 2 provides for engaging “all necessary measures [to be] taken within their capabilities, including the use of military means and capabilities.”

Even though Turkish armed forces did not play a direct military role in 2020, the Turkish military command is thought to have aided in the military planning of the Second Karabakh War, which broke out on September 27, 2020. And even though most of Azerbaijan's military arsenal came from Russia, certain critical capabilities, like UAVs and laser-guided bombs, [came from Türkiye](#). Similarly, in 2023, Türkiye [said](#) it had “no direct role” but provided advisory support and political backing to Baku's reclaiming of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Georgia's Precarious Inactivity

As we saw, Russia's aggression against Ukraine re-invigorated the quest for security in the neighborhood, but only a few countries have viable options.

Georgia's position is objectively unenviable. It does not have the strategic depth to effectively resist Russia militarily, especially since Russia enhanced its military facilities in Georgia's occupied

provinces after the 2008 incursion. But it is made worse by Tbilisi's policy. The government failed to capitalize on the awareness generated in the Western security community about Russia's aggressive aims since its first land grab in Ukraine in 2014 and build its defensive capability. There is no proof that Georgia has made any advances in securing effective anti-access area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, such as sophisticated air defense or electronic warfare tools.

The relationship with NATO continued on administrative auto-pilot but has [lost its dynamism](#), with the NATO SG Special Representative Javier Colomina expressing [dissatisfaction](#) with the pace of reforms. At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, there [were signs](#) that Georgia – the erstwhile leading state in partnership with NATO – was falling behind Ukraine on its path to membership. Georgia's former Prime Minister, Irakli Gharibashvili, publicly [doubted the possibility of joining NATO](#), saying, “We must think of ourselves first.” He also [seemed to blame](#) Ukraine's NATO aspiration for Russia's aggression. After Russia's new aggression against Ukraine, Tbilisi did not participate in the weapons substitution program, which saw several European states give their old Soviet air defense, armored, and artillery assets to Ukraine in exchange for newer Western-made models. Georgia got some [additional anti-tank Javelin missiles](#) from the U.S. but did not sign any large-scale weapons procurement deals that would have qualitatively improved its posture.

Two types of actions can be, however, discerned. One is the continuation of the trilateral partnership with Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Tbilisi participated in a [trilateral defense ministerial](#) in 2023 and is planning to host one in 2024. While undoubtedly valuable for securing oil and gas infrastructure against sabotage, this format offers Georgia no formal mutual security commitments or guarantees in case of larger-scale aggression.

Second, by far most dominant, has been Georgia's tactic of "restraint" towards Russia following its aggression on Ukraine. Georgia has joined sanctions in a limited way and welcomed Russians fleeing hardship and mobilization, providing them an outlet to Europe. The government cracked down on public displays of dissatisfaction with Russia-related policies, prevented the critics of Moscow from entering Georgia, and acted as one of the trading hubs for partially replacing imports of goods and services after the Western sanctions hit. Recently, Georgian security services [publicized a special operation](#), which they said prevented Ukraine from moving explosive devices to mainland Russia.

To put simply, Georgia's current strategy of "strategic patience" seems to be to put its head down and accommodate the Kremlin to the extent possible without attracting the ire of the West. Moscow [officially refers](#) to this as Tbilisi "forming its own sovereign policy" as opposed to being "the lapdog of the U.S."

To put simply, Georgia's current strategy of "strategic patience" seems to be to put its head down and accommodate the Kremlin to the extent possible without attracting the ire of the West.

The [foreign policy egotism](#) is presented as pragmatic rationality in Tbilisi. It carries its costs and is also hitting its limits. The [transactional approach](#) towards the West and flirtations with Russian (and [Belorussian](#)) security services is undermining Georgia's credentials as a partner. Russia's creeping aggression and [militarization](#) of the occupied provinces are continuing unabated. So do detentions of Georgian citizens, regularly culminating in tragedies like the recent [shooting](#) of a villager by the occupation troops.

Entering the holding pattern and exercising caution while regional security is in flux and the attention of Georgia's Western partners is focused on Ukraine is rational. But in Georgia's case, the rationality would also command enhancing its own defensive capabilities and moving ahead towards the "Golden Standard" of security architecture – the NATO membership. That movement has been lacking momentum, as Shota Gvineria describes in this volume.

As immobilism accrues, it would be increasingly difficult to catch up on the lost time. Absent Russia's dramatic military and geopolitical defeat, without a sizeable military force, absent the resources or popular readiness to fight, Georgia will increasingly fade into Russia's military and security space – or become the ground of contention without an agency of its own ■

Awakening Georgia's NATO Prospects

Sixteen years ago, in April 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, the Allies agreed that Georgia would become a NATO member. This decision has been reconfirmed at all 12 successive NATO summits since then. The Alliance [stands](#) firm in its support for Georgia's right to decide its future and foreign policy, while Georgia's constitution [tasks](#) authorities to ensure the full integration of Georgia into NATO. However, translating these two-sided best intentions into tangible integration progress has proven difficult.

Russia currently displays its usual [hostility](#) to Georgia's active collaboration with NATO and the United States. Russia has effectively employed a coercive [hybrid strategy](#) affecting the Georgian government's decision-making calculus. The consecutive governments of Georgia considered seeking refuge in the Euro-Atlantic alliance the sole viable option for mitigating the risk of Russian aggression. However, the Georgian Dream Government has shifted the approach, suggesting a strat-

egy of aligning with the perceived threat posed by Russia to [prevent](#) military conflict. Consequently, the Georgian Dream's once confident narratives regarding NATO integration have waned, resulting in a noticeable deceleration in NATO-Georgia relations.

Given the deteriorating security environment surrounding Georgia, there is a pressing need to reinvigorate Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration prospects.

The war in Ukraine has significantly worsened the security landscape in the wider Black Sea region, and Georgia is facing a severe security deficit. In response to the new security environment, Sweden and Finland reversed their decades-long non-alignment traditions in favor of NATO, which was met with relatively muted Russian displeasure. But, even though NATO enlargement returned



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Inspired by NATO's 'Protect the Future' mural in Vilnius, Lithuania, 2024.

to the agenda, Georgia's approximation chances were not affected. Georgia-NATO relations have regrettably devolved into bureaucratic exchanges between Brussels and Tbilisi. Despite consistently high public support, currently [estimated](#) at 65%, political discourse on NATO membership within Georgia has receded in recent years. Given the deteriorating security environment surrounding Georgia, there is a pressing need to reinvigorate Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration prospects.

Integration vs Partnership

Relations with NATO can be viewed through two prisms - the process of integration/accession and the process of practical cooperation. The integration in NATO is a complex process with interdependent political and practical components. The political element of integration entails making essential decisions on advancing aspiring coun-

tries through different levels of cooperation, integration formats, or formal statuses. The practical component, in its essence, is aimed at implementing political decisions and consists of establishing and executing specific cooperation initiatives, capacity-building programs, and interoperability measures. Democratic reforms are considered essential criteria for the Allies to assess the readiness of the partners to advance in the political aspect of integration. In parallel, successful practical cooperation delivers increased defensibility, resilience, and interoperability and thus supports political integration.

The only formal precondition for NATO membership is enshrined in the open door principle of [Article 10](#) of the founding Washington Treaty: "The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede

to this Treaty.” The [Study on NATO Enlargement](#) elaborated in 1995, further explains the purpose and principles of enlargement; however, there are no universally applicable formal criteria for membership or a uniform integration process that can fit all candidate countries. In contrast to North Macedonia’s decade-long effort, Finland’s swift accession to NATO is the most recent proof that NATO integration is a highly customized political process.

The complexity of NATO’s integration process is well reflected in [five chapters](#) of the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is a practical tool to help candidate countries achieve NATO standards in all vital areas of state building: political and economic, defense and military, resources, security, and legal issues. The process and timeline of integration depend on how Allies perceive the candidate’s readiness and level of development in all these areas, case by case.

In the case of Georgia, at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, the MAP was declared as the “next step on Georgia’s way towards membership.” The 2015 NATO Foreign Ministerial declaration states that MAP is an “integral part of the integration process.” Georgia has already implemented 15 cycles of the Annual National Program ([ANP](#)), which is the exact mirror of the Annual National Plan – a primary document for overseeing reforms under the MAP process. The process and the content of the two documents are identical. Thereby, the MAP is an expression of the political decision rather than an additional set of practical obligations.

Furthermore, in 2015, the Allies agreed that Georgia had all the practical tools to prepare for eventual membership through the two additional formats – the NATO Georgia Commission ([NGC](#)) and the NATO Georgia Substantial Package ([SNGP](#)). However, the final path of Georgia’s integration process is still unclear. Whether Georgia still requires the Membership Action Plan or whether the

current instruments suffice is still a matter of debate, something which currently is muted due to the generally lowered interest in the NATO integration topic in Tbilisi.

An important aspect serving as an obstacle to NATO membership was the state of democracy in Georgia. Rhetorically, the Allies often commended Georgia’s substantial progress in democratic reforms. Still, the assessments [always](#) noted that much work remained to be done, implying that the progress achieved in implementing (primarily judiciary and electoral) reforms was insufficient for getting Georgia to the next level in the integration process. A perception of Georgia’s current democratic performance by NATO closely echoes the state of implementation of EU recommendations and is affected by the tense relations with various EU stakeholders, at times [raising](#) “grave concerns over the lack of substantial progress and further negative developments in Georgia concerning democratic standards and the rule of law.” Currently, NATO [links](#) the Allies’ expectations of democratic reforms with the EU’s [nine recommended steps](#) and refers to the reforms that must be carried out within the EU framework as also necessary for NATO accession. At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, Allies were [clear](#) that “to advance its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, Georgia must make progress on reforms, including key democratic reforms, and make best use of the ANP.”

In contrast with political aspects, Georgia’s practical [cooperation](#) with NATO manifested through participation in exercises, missions, and capacity-building programs has been regarded as remarkable and exemplary throughout the last two decades. However, in parallel to the hindered political process of Georgia’s NATO accession, Georgia’s practical cooperation has also come to a low point in 2023. This could be noticed in the important and measurable domain of cooperation – participation in NATO-led operations and exercises.

after the termination of Western involvement in Afghanistan, Georgia lost the status of a significant contributor to international security – its serious advantage in the NATO integration process.

Historically, Georgia has been actively involved in NATO-led operations, providing troops to KFOR in Kosovo from 1999 to 2008, being one of the most significant non-NATO contributors to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and one of the top overall contributors to the follow-on Resolute Support Mission (2015–2021). Georgia's consistent involvement and suffered losses have symbolized its commitment to international security and cooperation with NATO. Georgia also contributed to counter-terrorist maritime surveillance in the Mediterranean through Operation Active Endeavour and has supported maritime situational awareness in Operation Sea Guardian since 2016. However, after the termination of Western involvement in Afghanistan, Georgia lost the status of a significant contributor to international security – its serious advantage in the NATO integration process.

Georgia has regularly participated in multinational exercises led by NATO and the Allies. In 2023, Georgia [hosted](#) two significant exercises: “Agile Spirit 2023,” – a multinational military exercise designed to strengthen defense capabilities through joint training and cooperation among NATO member and partner countries, and “Maple Arch” command and post-international exercise aimed at increasing partners' interoperability with NATO. In 2022, Georgia also [engaged](#) in a “Noble Partner” US-led biannual exercise promoting the readiness of Georgia's defense forces. This exercise was strongly condemned by Russia in an official [statement](#) as a threat to national and regional security.

Regrettably, in 2023, Georgia decided not to [participate](#) in the multinational exercise “Defender 23,” involving over 15,000 troops from more than 20 Allied and partner nations. The Ministry of Defense justified opting out of “Defender 23” with the need to optimize resources for participation in other large-scale military exercises. However, this decision was viewed in the context of Tbilisi's cooling relations with the West and Russia's reaction to “Noble Partner,” casting a shadow on Georgia's decade-long status as a reliable partner.

The NATO integration process also involves a bureaucratic layer in which the political and practical components are shaped. This dimension keeps practical initiatives rolling under concrete frameworks, which, in Georgia's case, is the SNGP. In December 2020, a refreshed SNGP was [adopted](#) with updated timelines and ambitions. The comprehensive upgrade encompassed various domains such as air, land, sea, and cyberspace, covering tactical, operational, and strategic levels, and comprised 16 initiatives, including three added in 2020 to enhance Georgia's military medical capacity, English language training, and codification and standardization systems. The 2023 Vilnius Summit introduced additional initiatives in crisis management, cyber security, military engineering, secure communications, training facilities, and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense. Currently, these capacity-building programs are one of the few areas where NATO-Georgia cooperation can be considered intensive.

The bureaucratic layer is essential in maintaining institutional and human contacts between NATO and Georgian officials. Through this interaction, official communication takes place on all political, practical, and bureaucratic aspects. Choosing the right words and forms of communication, which adequately reflect the real state of relations between NATO and Georgia and resonate with the positions of all NATO member states, is a time-consuming but important part of business.

This bureaucratic exercise can affect the process of integration and even influence public perceptions and the speed of reforms. Currently, maintaining high-level personal contacts and positive narratives about NATO-Georgia relations are becoming increasingly challenging, directly affecting political and practical aspects of the integration process and dramatically increasing the burden of maintaining relations on the bureaucratic layer.

Even at the declarative level, the Georgian Dream exhibits uncertainty and a lack of commitment to invest in achieving immediate progress in the integration process. In 2022, former Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili [suggested](#) that Georgia first has to solve its territorial conflicts with Moscow before joining NATO. Later, in 2023, he [added](#) that NATO enlargement was one of the main reasons why Russia started the war in Ukraine, explaining why his government is hesitant about NATO. However, in December 2023, a parliamentary del-

egation visiting NATO HQ in Brussels requested more clarity on the NATO integration process and pushed for a specific schedule and membership criteria. Contradicting Gharibashvili's statements and ignoring the need for further democratic reforms, the delegation [stated](#) that the country is ready for NATO membership, the ball is in the Alliance's court, and Georgia expects matching steps and a fair decision within a reasonable time. New Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's dry [statement](#) after his meeting with the Secretary-General on February 21, 2024, during his first foreign visit to Brussels, once again attested to the lack of Georgia's result-oriented strategy towards NATO integration.

At the declarative level, the Georgian Dream exhibits uncertainty and a lack of commitment to invest in achieving immediate progress in the integration process.

NATO Integration Process	
Political Integration	Practical Cooperation
May 1997 Georgia became a member of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council	August 1999 Georgian contingent deployed in KFOR
November 2002 Georgia made a declaration on its aspiration to NATO membership	October 2004 Georgian joins operation in Afghanistan
June 2004 Georgia joined "Individual Partnership Action Plan"	October 2010 SecGen visit to Georgia
February 2005 NATO Liaison Officer for the South Caucasus was assigned to Georgia	November 2011 SecGen and NAC visit to Georgia
June 2006 launch of the Intensified Dialogue with Georgia on NATO membership issues	November 2013 SecGen and NAC visit to Georgia

NATO Integration Process	
Political Integration	Practical Cooperation
April 2008 Allies agreed that Georgia will become a member of NATO	February 2014 NATO Military Committee visit to Georgia
September 2008 NATO-Georgia Commission was established	August 2015 SecGen visit and opening of JTEC
December 2008 Development of Annual National Program has started	September 2016 NAC visit to Georgia
May 2012 Georgia was mentioned as a NATO aspirant partner country	March 2017 Military Committee visit to Georgia
September 2014 Allies have endorsed a Substantial NATO-Georgia Package	May 2017 NATO Parliamentary Assembly visit to Georgia March 2019 NATO –Georgia Exercise in JTEC
December 2015 Allies declared that Georgia has all practical tools to prepare for the eventual membership	March 2019 NATO SecGen visit to Georgia
✕	March 2019 NATO Military Committee visit to Georgia
✕	October 2019 NATO NAC visit to Georgia
✕	September 2021 NATO ship's port call in Batumi
✕	October 2021 NATO Military Committee visit to Georgia
✕	October 2022 NATO-Georgia exercise in JTEC
✕	September 2023 Georgia joined Operation Sea Guardian
✕	July 2023 SNGP enhanced and extended
✕	November 2023 NATO Military Committee visit to Georgia

Way Ahead

Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine made it clear that only NATO's further enlargement in the Black Sea region can be a stabilizing factor for regional security. The only way for the West to avoid establishing new dividing lines and spheres of influence in Europe and contain Russia's aggression is to pursue its strategic agenda for a better and safer Europe.

Just as the EU made a geopolitical decision to grant Georgia candidate status, NATO needs to make a strategic decision and move Georgia's integration forward. Despite the Georgian government's hesitation, the Allies should acknowledge Georgia's national interests fixed in constitutional determination, the Georgian people's overwhelming support for NATO, and the sacrifices in NATO-led missions. A tangible step forward in Georgia's NATO integration process would further convey that strengthening the rule-based security system is still crucial for NATO and that challenging the borders of sovereign European states by military force can never become an effective foreign policy weapon.

Just as the EU made a geopolitical decision to grant Georgia candidate status, NATO needs to make a strategic decision and move Georgia's integration forward.

Given the ongoing declining dynamics in NATO-Georgia relations and the absence of Georgia's ambitions, making significant decisions on Georgia's integration processes is very difficult. At this point, a realistic strategic objective would be to keep Georgia in enlargement discussions, minimize damage to NATO-Georgia relations, and prepare grounds for Georgia's NATO membership through honest discussions on all the outstanding

political issues impeding progress in integration. These objectives can be achieved with greater involvement with Georgia's pro-democracy forces and vastly pro-Western civil society, even if official authorities are hesitant to actively pursue the NATO membership agenda.

Granting the Membership Action Plan seems to be the only logical and tangible continuation of Georgia's NATO integration process, even if it is too overdue. At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, Allies reiterated the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia would become a member of the Alliance with the MAP as an integral part of the process and reaffirmed all elements of that decision and subsequent decisions. However, in the case of Ukraine, the alliance recognized that Ukraine's path to full Euro-Atlantic integration has moved beyond the need for the Membership Action Plan. This decision, in addition to the quick accession of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance, strips the MAP of its political relevance. Therefore, since Georgia already has all the practical instruments to prepare for membership, there is no reason to withhold the MAP any longer.

If granted, the MAP can be a solid framework for scrutinizing and advocating democratic reforms in Georgia.

MAP does not offer any security guarantee. However, it can indicate the irreversibility of the accession without prejudice to the final decision on the time and modalities of membership. If granted, MAP will provide a legitimate and secure platform for defining the terms of eventual membership, leaving less space for conspiracy theories, disinformation, and speculations on the timelines and criteria of membership. Even an indication about the possibility of granting the MAP to Georgia will invigorate content-oriented discussions in Georgia's political discourse. It will equip pro-Western stakeholders with the rhetorical ammunition

to demand merit-based progress and democratic reforms from the Georgian authorities. If granted, the MAP can be a solid framework for scrutinizing and advocating democratic reforms in Georgia.

It is critical that Georgia's NATO integration process is not held hostage to Russian occupation. Therefore, there is an urgent need to decouple Georgia's NATO accession from the process of de-occupation of Georgia's territories. The Allied decision to acknowledge the fact of illegal occupation of Georgia's regions and adopt appropriate language in NATO documents is key in this regard. NATO and all Allies already unequivocally support Georgia's territorial integrity. NATO regularly calls on Russia to reverse its recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region of Georgia as independent states and to withdraw its forces from Georgia. Most NATO countries de jure condemned the illegal occupation of Georgian territories. Thus, it would be logical if the Allies acknowledged Georgia's regions as occupied in the next NATO Summit's statement.

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To support Georgia's peaceful conflict resolution strategy, maintaining the non-recognition policy of the Alliance is vital. The key controversial aspect of the occupation in the context of Georgia's NATO integration is the possible (non) application of the military component of Article 5 to the territories that are currently under effective Russian control. Recognition of Georgia's territories as occupied can pave the way to the discussions on the conditionality of the partial, non-military application of Article 5 to the occupied regions of Georgia without undermining Georgia's territorial integrity and without ending up in a military confrontation with Russia immediately upon Georgia's entry. Some Allies hesitate to support Georgia's membership because of this reason. Thus, the discussions about how the occupied regions could be partially and temporarily excluded from the scope of Article 5 could dispel the concerns of these Allies ■

How to Make Armenia's Pivot to the West Irreversible?

Acute hysteria of the Russian media during the revolutionary days of April 2018 in Armenia, denouncing yet another “color revolution instigated by the West,” quickly changed to unusually calm and reassuring “kuda oni denutsya?” (they have nowhere to go). In contrast to the Ukrainian Maidan in 2014 and the concerns about the survival of the Lukashenka regime in 2020 Belarus, Moscow did not rush to jump in with the force. The Kremlin had learned from the disastrous Maidan intervention and realized that Russia was risking little in Armenia. After all, unlike Ukraine or Belarus, Armenia did not border three NATO members and was too dependent on Russia.

Moscow's strategic choice was to wait for a newly elected Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, until he turned the corner. With trump cards at his disposal, Putin took a gamble on gradually diminishing his popularity. This strategy involved tactics such as undermining Armenian reforms, backing the

pro-Russian opposition, and employing disinformation or resorting to economic and energy coercion. The Kremlin's propaganda machine is at a full-out war against Pashinyan. As the Georgian example of 2005–2012 taught the Kremlin, building up local discontent with outside help can be more effective than a frontal attack on an undesirable regime.

Today, Armenia is trying to pivot to the West, but Russia still has many levers that could derail this trajectory by mobilizing internal and external resources. It is, therefore, a relevant question whether and how Armenia can make this strategic shift towards the West and what the West, particularly the EU, can do to support this pivot.

Armenia is trying to pivot to the West, but Russia still has many levers that could derail this trajectory by mobilizing internal and external resources.



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Waning Influence of Russia?

After the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia's image as Armenia's security guarantor took a severe hit. In fact, Russia's reputation had been on the decline well before 2023, even before Pashinyan came to power. In 2015, the Electric Yerevan protests against the hiked electricity prices and the murder of six members of the Avetisian family by a Russian soldier stirred anti-Russian sentiments, which further strengthened as Armenians learned that Russia sold arms to Azerbaijan.

The 2018 Velvet Revolution was fueled in part by this widespread dissatisfaction among the population towards Armenia's perceived surrender of its sovereignty to Moscow and submission to the Kremlin's directives by the corrupt elite. Despite

this underlying discontent, Armenian leadership maintained the conviction that there were no viable alternatives for national security, and Russia's predominant influence remained unquestioned, even under the new post-revolutionary government. Most importantly, Yerevan needed Moscow to counter the growing threat from Baku.

Confidence in Moscow is broken, which explains the failure of the pro-Russian Armenian opposition in the elections and street demonstrations attempting to destabilize Pashinyan.

But then Azerbaijan held two military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh, in 2020 and 2023. As a result, Karabakh was lost, and Russia did nothing to prevent it. Military defeat and the exodus of the

Armenian population from the former separatist republic untied many tongues and hands in Yerevan. The vast majority of Armenians will never see Russia as before. Confidence in Moscow is broken, which explains the failure of the pro-Russian Armenian opposition in the elections and street demonstrations attempting to destabilize Pashinyan.

Consequently, the Armenian government has stepped up efforts to build a closer partnership with the West while [distancing](#) itself from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and [showing](#) no interest in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – both Russia-dominated regional blocs. Ostensibly, the Pashinyan government [ratified](#) the Rome Statute following the ICC's indictment of Vladimir Putin. Armenia even [organized](#) joint military exercises with the USA and [purchased](#) military equipment from France.

However, the decrease of Russian influence in Armenia is not as unequivocal as it seems. Yes, the resounding victory of Azerbaijan and the strengthening of the Baku-Ankara tandem in the South Caucasus is not good news for Moscow, nor is the loss of Karabakh and its traditionally very pro-Russian elite. But Russia still has a game in Armenia. It retains the Gyumri military base, an air base in Erebuni, and the border guards who jointly control Armenia's borders with Türkiye and Iran. Russia is also trying to maintain its “peacekeepers” deployed in Karabakh as a buffer force separating Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Contrary to popular belief, the physical presence of the Russian military in Armenia increased after the two defeats suffered in Karabakh. The Russian army now has a strong presence in the southern regions of Armenia – Syunik and Vayots Dzor, which separate Azerbaijan from its exclave of Nakhchivan and connect Armenia with Iran. Under the pretext of dissuading Azerbaijan from forcing the corridor to Nakhchivan, the Russians are also

guarding the highway leading to Iran. They have de facto reduced Armenian sovereignty over this segment of national territory. A prominent Russian “cultural center” was recently opened in Kapan, a town of 40,000 inhabitants, and the Sisian military airport (also located in the Syunik region) was taken over and modernized by the Russian military.

In addition to hard power, Russia has considerable economic and commercial leverage. Still, Armenia's leading trading partner, Russia, controls many of the country's strategic enterprises, such as the railroads. It also has a strong presence in the banking and telecommunications sectors. Armenia is heavily dependent on Russian gas, which accounts for almost 90% of the country's gas imports. Essential products such as wheat and flour are also imported from Russia.

One of the paradoxical results of Western sanctions against Moscow is the increase of Russia's economic weight in the neighboring countries, which have neither applied nor joined Western sanctions. The most striking example is Armenia, whose trade with Russia has grown geometrically since Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Total trade figures [doubled](#) in 2022 and tripled in the first nine months of 2023 (as compared to 2021). It is easy to see that the bulk of this boom is attributable to the re-export of European products to Russia and Russian goods to the West. This explains the [tripling](#) of Armenian exports to Russia in one year and the rebalancing of the trade balance between the two countries, which was traditionally highly favorable to Russia.

Some sources describe Armenia as a “logistical hub” for Russia to circumvent Western sanctions. Armenia has suddenly [become](#) the world's 4th largest exporter of semiconductors, re-exporting many dual-use products to Russia. The US Department of Commerce and the EU are even [considering](#) sanctions against several Armenian companies. For now, the Western pressure on Yerevan is

relatively low, probably to avoid destabilizing the Pashinyan government. Still, it could increase if Armenia does not make more significant efforts in preventing the circumvention of sanctions by Russia.

In addition to bilateral trade, the [predominance](#) of remittances from Russia (accounting for almost two-thirds of the total remittances) also fuels the Armenian economy. Nearly three hundred thousand Russian emigrants since 2022 have revitalized entire sectors of the economy, from the IT sector to real estate and services.

The record growth rates recorded by the Armenian economy since 2022 - 14% in 2022 and 7.5% in 2023 - are mainly due to economic ties with Russia. Considering Russia's historical pattern of using economic coercion, Armenia's economic progress has become dependent on Moscow, which is likely to weaponize further its influence to hinder Armenia's closer ties with the West. Armenia has already experienced this dynamic, as evidenced by the recent suspension of the validity of Armenian driving licenses in Russia, targeting Armenian migrant workers, and heightened customs scrutiny for Armenian brandy, often referred to as "cognac" in the post-Soviet region.

Russia could go much further if Armenia takes decisive steps towards the West.

Russia could go much further if Armenia takes decisive steps towards the West. The reason Moscow is only taking targeted action at this stage is that it needs Armenia as one of the hubs, helping Russia sidestep Western sanctions.

What Could the West Do? Security First!

Over the past three decades, relations between Russia and Armenia have reached their lowest point. None of Armenia's political leaders has been as critical of Moscow as Pashinyan. In a recent [interview](#) with the Wall Street Journal, he went so far as to declare that the presence of the Russian military provided no benefit to Armenia. With Russia preoccupied and entangled in a lingering conflict on the Ukrainian front, the timing seems opportune for the EU and the US to engage further with Yerevan. Moreover, the EU's decision to grant Georgia candidate status also holds promise for Armenia.

If the West and Armenia are genuinely committed to strengthening ties, they must take decisive actions, recognizing the risks involved. Half-hearted measures or unfulfilled declarations might prove more perilous than taking no action at all, potentially escalating tensions and prompting Russia to adopt a more aggressive stance.

Unless a solution is found to Armenia's precarious security situation, no Western measure will have any effect. Armenia needs lasting peace with neighboring Azerbaijan and normalized relations with Türkiye. Today, Russia is taking advantage of the tensions along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border in both the south (Syunik) and the north (Tavush) to impose its reinforced military presence, arguing that it is the only power able to protect Armenia despite its seriously dented reputation.

Replacing Russian troops with Western ones in Armenia seems unrealistic, but making the Russian military presence unnecessary and redundant can be feasible. To achieve this, defusing the explosive potential of a renewed armed conflict with Azerbaijan with possible Turkish participation is a must. This can happen only with a comprehen-

sive peace agreement between Baku and Yerevan obtained through Western mediation. The lasting peace and the security guarantees would untie Yerevan's hands to demand the departure of Russian troops.

The West should also push to normalize relations between Ankara and Yerevan. This is now more feasible than in 2009 when the so-called "Zurich Protocols" were signed but never ratified. At that time, Azerbaijan's close ties with Türkiye prevented the attempt to decouple Turkish-Armenian relations from the resolution of the Karabakh conflict.

The peace agreement between Baku and Yerevan will require the USA and the EU to put political and diplomatic weight behind it. The obstacles are abundant. In addition to Russia's attempts to prevent an agreement that reduces its role in the region, Azerbaijan and Türkiye will have to be convinced.

After its resounding military victory in Karabakh, Baku feels strong and confident and sees itself as a regional power. Ilham Aliyev has unwavering support from Erdogan, notwithstanding differences of opinion on specific issues, which do not prevent the alliance from working perfectly. Aliyev also gained respect (not love) from Moscow, which is extremely rare in the latter's relations with its former satellites. Azerbaijan's relations with Iran are far from ideal but remain stable. Azerbaijan's relations with the West are transactional and pragmatic: Baku exports hydrocarbons and seeks to host a logistical and digital hub connecting Central Asia and China to Europe but avoids participation in integration processes (not seeking EU or NATO membership). Baku is not prepared to align itself with Western human rights values and democracy standards, thus sacrificing the nature of its political regime, but is seeking energy, economic, and logistical cooperation to, among other things, strengthen its independence from Russia. The West seems to be okay with this approach.

After establishing control over Karabakh, Azerbaijan is now trying to exploit its advantage to establish a land corridor (Zangezur, or Syunik corridor, depending on who says it) with its exclave of Nakhchivan through Armenian territory. If built, this corridor would not only directly connect two separated Azerbaijani territories but also serve as the crossroads for East-West and South-North trade. Thundering declarations, muscle-flexing, and skirmishes on the Armenian border are used to pressure Armenia into more concessions. Considering the geopolitical importance of this corridor, it sometimes seems that Baku might even use force to open the corridor and build necessary rail and road infrastructure. But doing so would mean invading Armenian territory, and Armenia is still a member of the CSTO. To alleviate Moscow's concerns, Baku also seems to insist on the Russian military guaranteeing the security of the future corridor, an utterly unacceptable proposition for Yerevan.

The West faces the challenge of brokering such a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia that does not compel Armenia into a deal susceptible to exploitation by Russia to destabilize Armenia's political leadership. With the Russian energy embargo in place, Azerbaijan has emerged as a crucial partner for the EU in terms of energy supply, deepening the interdependence between the parties. Azerbaijan has demonstrated greater assertiveness and astuteness in negotiations compared to Brussels. While Azerbaijan's share of EU gas imports constitutes only 2-3% of the total, the EU imports a significant portion—about a quarter—of the gas produced in Azerbaijan and nearly 30% of its exports. The EU has not fully leveraged this factor in its negotiations with Azerbaijan, but it possesses the potential to expedite the peace process.

The Turkish factor is also essential for Armenian security. For Ankara, the benefits of peace between Baku and Yerevan and normalized relations with

Armenia are apparent. Türkiye will not go against Azerbaijan's fundamental interests but could facilitate the dialogue between Baku, Brussels, and Washington. It will only happen, however, if the existing problems between the West and Türkiye are shelved. In other words, improved relations between Türkiye and the West would be a positive factor for peace in the region and, ultimately, for the end of the Russian military presence.

Today, we are far from that: Ankara favors reducing the Western presence in the South Caucasus and, in this respect, appears to be more aligned with Moscow and Teheran. But Russian-Turkish rivalries are numerous, giving the West room to maneuver to alienate the Kremlin and develop a closer position with Türkiye on the Armenian-Azerbaijani issue.

Other measures that the West could take to reduce Russian influence in the security sphere are more concrete and feasible even before the peace agreements are signed.

It is imperative to assist Armenia in reforming its security sector, given the evident and overwhelming infiltration of Russian influence across various security structures. A similar scenario was observed in Georgia and Ukraine until local pro-Western administrations initiated substantial internal purges within the security institutions. Numerous elements within the Armed Forces still bear the remnants of the post-Soviet era and years of CSTO membership and close collaboration with the Russian military have impeded modernization and reform efforts. A comprehensive overhaul is required, involving a gradual alignment with NATO standards and the modernization of security institutions.

Today, 90% of Armenia's military equipment and ammunition are imported from Russia. If Yerevan wants to reduce its reliance on Russian weapons, which also causes strategic dependence on

Moscow, the West should help Armenia to diversify its suppliers. India is already [present](#) in Armenia's arms market, and its share is poised to grow in the future. The EU has already allocated some non-lethal equipment from the European Peace Facility but this measure is not even close to what is needed for a significant shift. France is the most advanced NATO member country in the supply of military equipment (radar systems, anti-air missiles, and training of Armenian troupes) to Armenia, and the military cooperation between Paris and Yerevan is expected to [expand](#) further as evidenced by the visit of the French minister of Defense to Armenia and agreements on arms sales. Other NATO member states should follow.

One of the most critical aspects of security is border control. Russia now essentially controls three of the country's four borders. Europeans are already present through the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), but this instrument is far too weak compared to Russia's presence. A significant increase in the number of monitors and equipping them appropriately could be a first step.

Economy, Trade, and Resilience

As noted above, Armenia's economic dependence on its former tutelary power is among the most critical factors of Russian influence. To escape this asymmetrical situation, Armenia must diversify its economic relations and massively reorient its trade policy.

The EU could put the DCFTA back on the table, stimulating Armenia to leave the EEU gradually.

Armenia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) membership is incompatible with the EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). The DCFTA was almost entirely negotiated by Armenia between 2011 and 2013 but was not conclud-

ed due to Putin's pressure on then-Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan. The EU could put the DCFTA back on the table, stimulating Armenia to leave the EEU gradually. That said, Armenia could keep the free trade agreement with Russia, which does not contradict the DCFTA. Obviously, when this shift starts, Russia will adopt punitive measures against Yerevan, and the EU should be ready to disburse significant sums to support the country's trade and political reorientation. Armenia's advantage in this scenario is its small size (2.6 million inhabitants), which limits costs. Geopolitics comes at a price.

Before signing and enforcing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), it would be even more impactful if the EU provided Armenia with Autonomous Trade Preferences (ATP). This approach, already implemented for Ukraine and notably beneficial for its agricultural sector, proved successful for Moldova in specific industries between 2008 and 2015. The advantage of ATP over the DCFTA lies in its ratification-free adoption by the EU Council.

Armenia would be wise to diminish its reliance on Russian energy. Gradually shifting towards more hydrocarbons from Central Asia is one avenue to explore. Additionally, Armenia could advance its renewable energy and hydropower capabilities with EU assistance. Brussels could invite Armenia to join the European Energy Community, thereby mitigating the potential effects of Russian energy manipulation and accelerating Armenia's integration into the European energy market.

The EU must also accelerate the visa liberalization process with Armenia. Despite the EU Foreign Affairs Council's expressed [intention](#) in November 2023 to "explore ways of launching a dialogue on visa liberalization," the formulation indicates the EU's hesitancy in adopting a clear stance. Visa liberalization agreements encounter considerable opposition from member state governments due

to apprehensions about potential mass immigration. Politically, far-right parties instrumentalize the issue, often aligning with Moscow sympathizers. Brussels must transcend these obstacles, possibly after the European Parliament elections (June 2024), to win over the hearts and minds of Armenians.

The EU must also accelerate the visa liberalization process with Armenia.

Lastly, following the momentous [decision](#) by the Council in December 2023 to commence membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and grant Georgia the EU candidate status, the EU could bolster and incentivize Yerevan's strategic pivot toward the West by acknowledging the European perspective for Armenia. This perspective, distinct from the candidate status, carries significant symbolic and geopolitical weight, articulating European aspirations without specifying a concrete timeline for membership but delineating the bounds of European ambitions.

Preparing for the Worst

Undertaking strategic shifts, such as Armenia's potential and desirable pivot to the West, demands considerable courage, determination, and a willingness to take risks. Georgia and Ukraine have borne a heavy toll in their efforts to break free from Russian influence, facing trade embargoes, mass deportations, energy supply sabotage, various destabilization tactics, terrorism, hybrid warfare, and ultimately, armed conflicts resulting in the occupation of parts of their territories. The Armenian Prime Minister has demonstrated his readiness to take risks and make tough decisions on multiple occasions. However, these risks must be managed to avoid sparking a new conflict, particularly with Russia.

The EU and the US must be prepared to confront

potential escalations from Moscow, especially considering that they will likely shoulder the financial burdens associated with Armenia's economic realignment. Without clear and decisive policies from the Western powers, the current status quo will likely persist and potentially worsen. Thus, the West needs to prepare for the worst.

However, no matter how prepared Yerevan and the West are for possible Russian retaliation, and

no matter how big the Western endeavors to assist Armenia are, they will be rendered futile if Ukraine succumbs to Russian aggression and Putin wins. Conversely, if Ukraine prevails, Armenia's integration into Western structures will be significantly facilitated. Ultimately, the most effective assistance the West can offer Armenia is to support Ukraine in its struggle against Russian imperialism ■

How Can the EU Regain Leverage Over Georgia in 2024?

In November 2023, the European Commission issued a favorable recommendation for Georgia's candidate status, subsequently confirmed by the European Council on 15 December. The EU's decision was clearly [geopolitical](#). As Ukraine and Moldova were promised to open the accession talks with the EU, Brussels did not leave Georgia two steps behind. The EU, however, also pointed out that the 12 conditions it had imposed on Georgia in 2022 were still to be fulfilled, with only three qualifying as fully satisfied. This assessment was in line with the evaluation of independent civil society organizations, which [published](#) six editions of "Statusmeter" in 2023 and also claimed that just 3 of the 12 conditions were fully implemented.

While the EU's decision to grant Georgia the candidate status was correct from the geopolitical and pragmatical standpoint, it left a question had the EU lost leverage vis-à-vis Georgia in 2024, a crucial year of elections in both the bloc and Georgia.

Georgia's profoundly polarized elite often instrumentalizes EU accession for political ends, exacerbating divisions.

The ruling Georgian Dream party, for instance, previously [framed](#) EU demands for reforms, such as de-oligarchization and alignment with Western sanctions against Russia, as efforts by the "global war party" to embroil Georgia in conflict with Russia. However, following the attainment of candidate status, the party pivoted its narrative, touting the achievement as validation of its "with honor to Europe" approach and deflecting criticism by claiming its actions were vindicated.

In a similar vein, the opposition, deeply critical of Georgian Dream's pro-Russian policies and discontent with the pace of the EU-demanded reforms, labeled the Government as pro-Russian and anti-European. Thus, during 2023, mutual accusations were abundant. Conversely, the opposition, civil society, and the President, despite staunchly advocating for Georgia's European path, were accused by the Government of undermining the country's progress toward the EU candidacy.

As 2024 started, suspicions again arose about the genuine intentions of the Georgian Dream to im-



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plement the EU-mandated reforms at a fast pace. With the important 2024 parliamentary elections scheduled in October 2024, the big question remains: whether Georgian Dream will really deliver on the nine steps set forth by the European Union as a precondition to moving further on the accession track, or will it push the reforms after the elections? With the European Parliament elections also forthcoming in June 2024 and the obvious lame-duck status of the current Commission until November 2024, there is a likelihood that the Georgian Dream will not rush with the reforms, especially the ones that could jeopardize their grip on power.

As 2024 started, suspicions again arose about the genuine intentions of the Georgian Dream to implement the EU-mandated reforms at a fast pace.

Therefore, the Georgian Dream's strategy in 2024 might be a replication of the strategy from the previous year – try to maintain power, demonize opponents, attack the EU, and wait for the geopolitical decision at the end of the year. After all, if the Georgian Dream stays in power, why would the EU dare to challenge the credentials of a democratically elected Government and leave it in Russia's den? Also, the EU leadership would be freshly elected, with no prior history of hostile exchanges with the Georgian Dream. So, another episode of geopolitical goodwill could carry Georgia to the next stage – opening the accession talks with the EU.

Changed Prime Minister, Same Policy

At the end of 2023, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the leader of the Georgian Dream, [returned](#) to the party, occupying a newly created “honorary chairman” position and equipping himself with the official power

to nominate the Prime Minister. He indeed very soon changed the Prime Minister, relegating former PM Irakli Gharibashvili to a “chairman of the party” and promoting Irakli Kobakhidze, former party chairman, to the post of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Kobakhidze was the spearhead of the anti-EU rhetoric in 2023, often talking about the “global war party”, criticizing the EU for insisting on unfair reforms, and blaming European decision-makers for being in cahoots with the opposition parties. After his appointment as the Prime Minister, he visited Brussels, where he met with the HRVP Borrell and EP President Metsola and [returned](#) with the message that the EU was content with how Georgia was advancing on the EU path.

But as the visit was taking place in Brussels, the Georgian Dream [introduced](#) the changes to the Electoral Code, which effectively left the power to appoint the CEC chairman in the hands of the ruling party. Also, as Mr. Kobakhidze was rubbing shoulders with the EU officials, the Parliamentary chairperson was busy attacking the local NGOs with [“poisoned lies”](#), blaming them for being politically affiliated and working for foreign interests. Not just that, the Georgian Dream-affiliated People's Power faction of the ruling majority resumed its anti-Western rhetoric.

On the changes to the electoral law, the Venice Commission [said](#) in late 2023 that “there is a higher risk that the ruling party alone could elect the (non-partisan) CEC members and Chairperson” if these changes were passed. The ruling majority seems to be doing exactly that.

Regarding Civil Society Organizations, the EU Ambassador to Georgia [said](#) in February 2024 that “NGOs make a valuable contribution to Georgia's EU integration.” The ruling majority did not seem to care about this assessment, openly attacking the group of Georgian CSOs, who [published](#) their vision of how the nine steps should be implemented,

calling them not credible and politically affiliated and [warning](#) of the “foreign influence schemes” in Georgian politics.

These developments of just the last few months beg the question of whether there is still leverage that the EU can use to influence the reforms by the Georgian Dream.

Many Georgian CSOs are now calling for the Government to start vetting the judges in leadership positions to decrease the political control of the judiciary and ensure the trustworthiness and integrity of the Supreme Court and High Council of Justice members, as well as the heads of the City and District courts. Prime Minister Kobakhidze, however, defied the proposal, [claiming](#) that the “purpose of vetting is to exercise political control over the judicial system and encroach on the independence of justice, which is unacceptable.” One of the ruling party MPs [blamed](#) the West for using the vetting to control the judiciary in Albania, Ukraine, and Moldova and called on Georgians to avoid such an intervention from the West.

These developments of just the last few months beg the question of whether there is still leverage that the EU can use to influence the reforms by the Georgian Dream.

What Is the EU's Leverage Now?

The recent past has shown that the Georgian Dream's reforms were just sufficient for not getting a Fail mark from the EU. According to the Commission, only 3 of the 12 conditions from June 2022 were [fully implemented](#), the remaining rolling over to the new nine steps in one form or another. Most notably, the Georgian Dream did not fulfill the key recommendations on the independence of the judiciary, de-oligarchization, and

de-polarization. Neither did it increase the accountability and transparency of the Government, nor did it stop attacking the civil society and media. Despite these shortcomings, the EU's decision on the candidate status appreciated the European resolve of the Georgian people and also considered the geopolitical status quo. Indeed, leaving Georgia behind would have been an excellent present for Russia.

But the non-present to Russia turned out to be a good present to Ivanishvili, who is now formally back to politics and will try to capitalize on the EU candidacy during the election year, highly likely shelving the essential reforms until he ensures that he stays in power. [The Action Plan](#) for Implementing the 9 Steps, developed confidentially and only published after the Council Decision, clearly states that many essential reforms are scheduled for late 2024 or 2025; that is, after the EU's decision on opening the accession talks. The same is true for the [Action Plan](#) on Deoligachization, which was also developed without the participation of civil society and political opposition.

The EU was able to leverage the candidate status against Georgia until December 2023. The issue of EU candidacy was politically susceptible for the Georgian Government, as it felt enormous pressure from the Georgian society and political opposition, both overwhelmingly pro-European, anti-Russian, and pro-Ukrainian. However, with the EU candidate status already pocketed and public satisfaction sinking in, the stimulus for seriously undertaking the remainder of the reforms in the election year appears minimal.

From this outlook, the EU's leverage is either non-existent or very weak.

Therefore, the EU currently does not seem to have any leverage. Opening accession talks in the year when the EU and Georgia both face elec-

tions might not be realistic. In fact, the EU has not yet publicly and loudly made a statement linking Georgia's progress on the nine new steps to the opening of accession talks. Moreover, the decision on whether to start accession talks with Georgia will not be made until November-December 2024, i.e., after the Georgian elections are over and the winner is in the driving seat. From this outlook, the EU's leverage is either non-existent or very weak. However, there are still things the EU can do to "reinvent" the leverage if it plays its cards right.

How Can the EU Reinvent Leverage in 2024?

For the EU to reinvigorate leverage on Georgia, it must undertake a few steps, even if they have certain political ramifications for Georgia's polarized domestic political scene.

First, the EU must clearly articulate that the next step for Georgia is Accession Talks and that this step can be taken in late 2024 only if the reforms are fully undertaken. If the EU at the level of Ambassador, MEPs, and the Commission is vocal and clear that Georgia can start accession talks in 2024, Georgian media and civil society will continue exerting pressure on the Georgian Government to deliver the reforms before the October elections.

Second, the EU must step up its rhetoric on the necessity of the reforms from the high tribunes. Visits of the HRVP, Commissioner, or MEPs, who "bring the message" of delivering the reforms now, will give the EU more leverage, even if rhetorical. Last year's visits from HRVP Borrell, Commissioner Varhelyi, and various EU foreign ministers played a significant role in moving forward with the stalled reforms. This year, the same needs to be repeated.

Third, the EU must provide an interim assessment of how the nine conditions are implemented. Last year, in July, the Commission only gave an oral

interim evaluation of the progress, and even that proved quite successful. The Georgian Dream accelerated legislative and policy initiatives between the interim assessment and the end of the year. The EU can report in June 2024 in written or oral forms. Such an interim assessment can be instrumental in pushing the Georgian Dream not to delay the implementation of the important reforms after the parliamentary elections.

Fourth, the EU must be less lenient on the non-implementation of the nine steps than it was last year on the failure to implement the twelve conditionalities. The commitment to de-oligarchization was blatantly ignored by the Georgian Dream, which managed to change the discourse about whether the Law on Deoligarchization should have been passed. Retreat from the Law (because of a clear message from the European Commission and Venice Commission) was counted as progress by the EU, without regard to the absence of systemic reforms, which would genuinely contribute to deoligarchization.

In her presentation of the Enlargement report, the Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen, listed the accountability of the Government to the opposition as a success story, while in reality, during the last two years, the Georgian Dream did everything possible to weaken the opposition institutionally, even taking away constitutionally-guaranteed powers to create investigative commissions in the Parliament.

The EU must stop accepting the window-dressed reforms and needs to push for real steps

The EU must stop accepting the window-dressed reforms and needs to push for real steps, whether on the reform of the High Council of Justice, vetting of the judges, reversal of the laws that curbed the independence of the Central Bank, or increas-

ing the powers of the Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC). Incidentally, late last year, the Georgian Dream changed the law on broadcasting, equipping the GNCC with more punitive powers. When criticized, GD's response was that the EU endorsed these changes. The civil society actors who follow the media were struck that, indeed, the EU supported the changes, even though no consultations were held with the civil society or affected media.

Similarly, the EU requested the Georgian Dream to fight disinformation and propaganda against the EU values. While the ruling party can tick many boxes formally through the creation of action plans and parliamentary inquiries, the major step it must take is to stop its propaganda machine from anti-European and anti-Western rhetoric. Counting only formal steps will be counterproductive and inefficient as it will further encourage the Georgian Dream to delay or produce half-cooked reforms. Information Integrity Coalition, consisting of highly qualified Georgian civil society organizations, [published](#) a set of recommendations to fight disinformation. The EU can support this initiative and demand the Georgian Dream to follow up.

Fifth, the EU must make it clear that the free and fair competitive elections conducted in an atmosphere of non-violence are essential for opening the accession talks. This demand was incorporated in nine conditionalities. Now, the EU can fill in this condition with specific requests. For instance, lowering the electoral barrier, as was foreseen in the 2021 Charles Michel document, or allowing the Georgian migrants to vote in mass numbers, as well as refraining from massive vote-buying and boycotting the political debates, could be the concrete demands from the EU. Sending an interim long-term observation mission will also be an

important step since the electoral fraud will likely occur well before the elections through vote-buying, something that the short-term electoral mission focusing on the election day will not be able to observe.

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Finally, the EU should insist that the Georgian Dream listens to and cooperates with the civil society – not the organizations it fancies, but the critical ones. The demonization of civil society organizations as radical, in cahoots with the opposition or “foreign agents” and “traitors” has not stopped, neither from official channels nor through online propaganda. The Action Plan on Implementing the Nine Conditions that the Government published in 2024 is inconsistent with the EU's request to keep civil society involved. The Action Plan was not elaborated in consultation with civil society, and the government does not seem to plan to involve the NGOs in the policy-making process. In 2024, the Government will once again try to window-dress its antagonism towards the CSOs through the pro forma cooperation with the EU-Georgia Civil Society platform, a loose group of several hundred NGOs, which has a track record of speaking on behalf of the civil society, without proper authorization. The platform came under the spotlight for concluding a Memorandum with the Georgian Parliament in late 2023, a few months after the Government unsuccessfully attempted to pass the law on Foreign Agents. Most of the NGOs that resisted the Government's actions were neither consulted nor informed about the signature of the Memorandum ■

Navigating the European Political Community's Uncertain Future

Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine brought a geopolitical earthquake to Europe. On the one hand, it revived the EU's enlargement policy, but on the other, it pushed the EU member states to promulgate fresh political projects fitting their national interests. One such project is the European Political Community (EPC), masterminded by French President Emmanuel Macron and backed (at least for now) by the EU institutions and the member states.

In his [address](#) to the European Parliament on 9 May 2022, Macron stated that the EPC would encompass “democratic European nations that subscribe to our shared core values” and would aim at promoting political and security cooperation among its members, focusing on energy, transport, investments, infrastructure, and the free movement of people, with a particular emphasis on youth.

However, when the EPC's inaugural summit was held in Prague in October 2022, gathering the leaders of 44 countries and the heads of the EU in-

stitutions, not all participants stood out with their democratic credentials. Many European leaders with grave problems of human rights or those be-friending Russia were present. In fact, from the outset, the EPC demonstrated that “realpolitik and “get-together-diplomacy” took precedence over economic topics and European values and [princi-ples](#).”

In fact, from the outset, the EPC demonstrated that “realpolitik and “get-together-diplomacy” took precedence over economic topics and European values and principles.”

Two years after its conception, the EPC looks like a club of highly heterogeneous countries that can be clustered into three groups: (1) 27 EU member states, (2) European states not willing to join the EU (Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Azerbaijan, Armenia), including the one whose accession prospects are frozen (Türkiye), or who



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have left the EU (UK) and (3) those European states which are keen on joining the EU (Eastern Partnership Trio and Western Balkans). This diversity brings to the table a number of opposing viewpoints on almost all issues, ranging from the EU and NATO enlargement to relations with Russia and support for Ukraine.

The idea of the European political community is not new, as many other European leaders, from Christian Fouchet to Enrico Letta to Francois Mitterrand, have proposed similar concepts before. Mitterrand's European Confederation tabled in 1989, a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, never took off. Like the EPC, that project's first conference was also held in Prague in 1991, and it also focused on energy, transportation, telecommunication, and freedom of movement. However, the project did not succeed because of the unwillingness of the European states to cooperate with Russia in the early 1990s. As Macron explained, the inclusion of Russia "was swiftly deemed unacceptable for the states that had just freed themselves from the yoke of the Soviet Union."

France and Europe seem to have learned a lesson. Today, there is no place for Russia in the EPC. As the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell [put](#) it at the first EPC summit: "This meeting is a way of looking for a new order without Russia. It does not mean that we want to exclude Russia forever, but this Russia – Putin's Russia – has no seat."

Results, Fractures, and New Horizons

The October 2022 EPC summit was dominated by the issue of the long-running Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At that Summit, the EU decided to send the non-armed, non-executive civilian European Union Mission to Armenia (EUMA) to monitor and report on the security situation of the Armenian side of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. This was and by far remains one of the main achievements of the EPC.

The EPC was also relatively successful in address-

ing concrete cybersecurity issues, ensuring that the EPC participating countries were granted access to the European Cybersecurity Competence Centre, the EU's executive agency based in Bucharest, Romania, and tasked with funding and coordinating cybersecurity research projects. The EPC also tried to put youth policy at the core of its discussions, extending the "DiscoverEU" project to participants.

Another achievement of the EPC is that the UK returned to the European policy agenda-setting and even decided to host the Spring 2024 summit. This allows Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to focus on immigration, something he unsuccessfully attempted during the Granada Summit of October 2023. That the EPC is not at the top of British foreign policy priorities is evident in the fact that as of mid-February 2024, neither the exact date nor location of the Summit has been made public.

The creation of the EPC did send a clear message to Russia and Belarus that totalitarian states are not welcome in the grand European setting.

The creation of the EPC did send a clear message to Russia and Belarus that totalitarian states are not welcome in the grand European setting. The invitation of Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to the Granada Summit was also a political statement. However, Macron's idea of bringing together only the "democratic European nations" did not materialize as quite a few pro-Russian and non-democratic European leaders attended the EPC summits. Macron's "value-based" approach has been replaced by the alternative approach of the European Council President, Charles Michel, according to whom the EPC should be a European geopolitical [community](#) "extending from Reykjavik to Baku or Yerevan, from Oslo to Ankara."

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The main attractiveness of the EPC is its high-level, inclusive, and flexible format. So far, it remains a platform where all leaders of the European continent are equal. There is no need to negotiate the joint statement at the end of the Summit or assess the progress on the previously agreed action items, as was the case with the OSCE, which eventually rendered its Summits and Ministerials dysfunctional and symbolic. Bi-annual summits alternating between EU and non-EU countries also ensure a high interest in participation. Obviously, as time proceeds, increasing overlaps with the Council of Europe and OSCE Ministerials or European Council meetings will inevitably raise questions about the necessity of such intensive bi-annual gatherings; however, the fact that gatherings of all-of-Europe Heads of States are still relatively rare, could save the EPC's attractiveness.

The EPC has no institutional architecture, which could be its blessing and curse, depending on how events unfold. Without a secretariat and a dedicated budget, it can only mobilize funds through bilateral efforts or existing financial instruments available to the EU. More Europe-wide institutions, like the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) or the Three Seas Initiative Investment [Fund](#), could also be referred to, if need be. However, if the EPC only remains a talking shop that survives from summit to summit, a gradual loss of interest from the European leaders will be inevitable.

The last two summits provided a preview of such potential erosion. First, the President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, boycotted the second and third EPC summits after clashing with the Greek Prime Minister at the margins of the first meeting.

Later on, Erdoğan was followed by the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, who boycotted the EPC Granada Summit because of the pro-Armenian [statement](#) made by then-French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna and the subsequent [delivery](#) of defensive military equipment to Armenia.

It is no secret that the EPC is looked at cautiously by the South-Eastern and Eastern European states, which are in an enlargement queue. They fear that EPC could have a hidden agenda – providing an alternative platform to EU membership – a common trait of all previous European Confederation ideas. Because of this, the Presidents of Moldova and Ukraine pushed the enlargement issue high up on the agenda of the second EPC Summit held in Moldova in June 2023. Also, the EPC got initial lukewarm support from Berlin, citing the lack of consultation. The [research](#) by Teona Giuashvili for the European University Institute showed that “Germany viewed the EPC as a French idea and did not feel it had ownership over the proposal,” while Poland had concerns about EPC overshadowing the enlargement process and omitting the USA from the security-related discussions.

How to Make EPC More Valuable?

Having relevant high-level officials dealing with the issues that the EPC discusses could be valuable and increase the summits' efficiency. For instance, European security discussions in the EPC would greatly benefit from the presence of the NATO Secretary General or even the OSCE leadership, as long as the leadership still exists, risking Russian veto on the renewal of the mandates. Similarly, the directors of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) could contribute to more meaningful debates on migration.

Considering the diversity of interests of the EPC participating states, it would be efficient if the-

matic working groups were established to promote dialogue on the selected topics. This was also tried in 1989 by Mitterrand.

In addition, increasing the number of non-European participants when the issues relevant to them are discussed could be helpful. When discussing energy security, finding a place for oil-rich Central Asian and North African countries would make sense.

The EPC could borrow some features from the French [non-paper](#) of November 2019 on reforming the European Union accession process. The EPC can consider extending some of the EU's digital agenda to members who are ready for that. This might include reducing roaming tariffs or getting access to the Digital Europe Program, which brings digital technology to businesses, citizens, and public administration. The EPC can also gradually involve the participants in the EU's LIFE (L'Instrument Financier pour l'Environnement) program that aims to contribute to implementing, updating, and developing EU environmental and climate policy. The EPC members might also get involved in the EU's Creative Europe program, which supports the cultural and creative sectors.

Depending on the ambition, the EPC can help some participating states strengthen their democratic credentials. In this regard, the EU candidate countries can participate in the [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#) and utilize its tool, the [EU Fundamental Rights Information System](#). Another area of cooperation could involve extending the EU Rule of Law Toolbox and the EU Justice [Scoreboard](#) to the EU candidate countries. This could help the interested countries assess and improve their justice systems by relying on objective, reliable, and comparable data.

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Another field of policy cooperation is migration. The EPC participant countries can develop and promote circular migration schemes and invest in migration and development, especially in non-EU/EEA countries with high ratios of migrants and remittances.

Also, to define the meaning of the EPC and strengthen its ownership, it would be wise to ask the participant countries to table fresh proposals and review them. The EPC will soon undergo a severe first stress test as its fifth Summit is expected to take place in Hungary, which will hold the rotating EU presidency in the second half of 2024. It remains to be seen whether the European leaders will agree to visit Orbán in Budapest and whether they will manage to persuade Hungarian authorities to agree to hold the summit elsewhere. In any case, asking for fresh ideas that could fill the agenda of the EPC can be helpful. In 2009-2010, the OSCE tried to gather the visions of European security architecture from all participating states in what was called the Corfu Process. While the discussions did not end in a decision, quite an impressive collection of thoughts was gathered and stockpiled, which could be used in the future when a more conducive security environment emerges.

A Look from Tbilisi

Until now, Georgia has been using the EPC to advocate for its national interests, particularly mobilizing support for the EU candidate status. At the October 2023 EPC Granada Summit, two months before the Commission's recommendation, the Prime Minister of Georgia tried to [persuade](#) the EU member states "not to mistreat Georgia." The Georgian leadership also used the EPC to mingle with the European leaders even though chilly relations with the EU and Ukraine did not provide many important photo opportunities.

As the EPC matures into a semi-institutionalized format and becomes an integral part of European

high-level diplomatic (and even security) architecture, Tbilisi should think more about its contribution to the EPC format and the benefits it could yield for Georgia. In the EPC, Georgia could focus on regional conflicts, high-level diplomacy, and connectivity. But for this, Georgia should offer to hold the 2025 EPC summit in Tbilisi or Batumi. By then, the elections and the traditional post-election crisis should be over, and whoever is in the government could use the 2025 Summit to position Georgia in a new light.

By Spring 2025, Georgia will have either opened the accession negotiations or come close to opening them. This period will also be essential in securing the EU skeptics' support for advancing Georgia further on the European track.

Georgia can play a serious role in the EU's drive to decrease the dependence on Russian hydrocarbons. As the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen [put](#) it: "Since the beginning of Russia's war, we have decided to turn our back on Russian fossil fuels and to diversify towards reliable energy partners." The EU also aspires to develop energy infrastructure links with the South Caucasus and Central Asia further. In December 2022, backed by the European Commission, Romania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Hungary signed the strategic partnership agreement that envisages the construction of an undersea electricity cable. Georgia could bring more topics of connectivity between the EU and Central Asia to the EPC discussions.

Georgia could also contribute to a dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The EPC summits were used as venues for Pashinyan and Aliyev to meet and talk about future plans. Tbilisi could bring this issue back to the table and boost its role as a regional peacemaker. Moreover, Georgia could use the EPC to bring to the European agenda the issues of occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions.

Ensuring greater engagement of the EU in the conflict resolution process will be essential for the eventual conflict transformation, and there could be no bigger stage for flagging this topic than the EPC.

Georgia could use the EPC to bring to the European agenda the issues of occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions.

Finally, Georgia must also make it clear, together with Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkan states, that the EPC is not a substitute for European integration but a bonus format that gives an opportunity for the pan-European leadership to gather in one room and talk about the common plans and the issues that divide them. Finding such a room in Tbilisi or Batumi in 2025 would greatly benefit Georgia and the wider region ■

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