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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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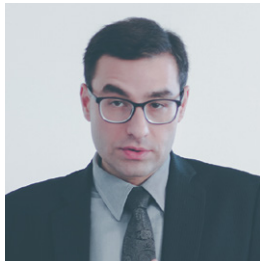
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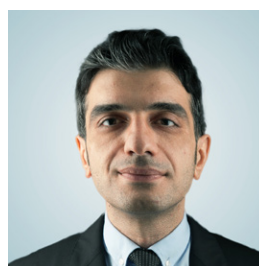
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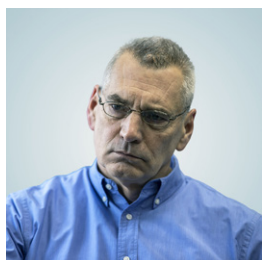
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Multiplayer Chess in the South Caucasus Will not End in a Draw

The past years in the South Caucasus have been marked by turmoil, and indications suggest this trend will persist in the foreseeable future.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine disrupted the regional power balance, while two conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan initially destabilized and later brought new opportunities to the Caucasus. Despite initial concerns in Georgia that Russia's victory could isolate the country behind a new Iron Curtain, the courageous resistance in Ukraine provided temporary relief. However, uncertainties remain as Georgia's government has taken a sharp turn away from the West, signaling intentions to embrace a Russian-style autocracy. Yet, resilient and freedom-loving Georgians are actively opposing the looming authoritarianism as this volume is being prepared for publication.

Leveraging Russian involvement in Ukraine, Türkiye has seized the opportunity to bolster its influence in the region, notably by supporting Azerbaijan in reclaiming Nagorno-Karabakh. However, domestic political shifts in Türkiye have weakened Erdogan's grip on power with the consequently on country's foreign policy. Sensing new openings, both the EU and the US are seeking to enhance their appeal to the region by offering prospects of European integration. In response, Georgians are demonstrating their steadfastness and commitment to Western values, while Armenia is pivoting towards the West following its defeat in the war against Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, emerging as the predominant beneficiary of regional developments, Baku has restored its territorial integrity and now stands as the foremost military power in the South Caucasus.

Opportunities abound as well. For the first time in recent memory, the South Caucasus could witness peace and connectivity. The establishment of railways, roads, and other transportation links has the potential to foster prosperity and tranquility throughout the region. Russia no longer holds unrivaled strength and allure for the South Caucasus states and populations. Regardless of how events unfold, one certainty remains: there will be no stalemate in the geopolitical chess game of the South Caucasus, with winners and losers determining the region's security and stability. This volume explores precisely these dynamics – unraveling the most significant trends, challenges, and opportunities facing the region.

Temuri Yakobashvili opens with the vision of how to reformat the South Caucasus taking into account the evolving geopolitics of the region, emphasizing the impact of recent conflicts and the need for adaptation by regional actors. The article explores the complexities of statehood in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, analyzing their internal divisions and external challenges. It also examines security considerations, technological advancements in warfare, and economic prospects, suggesting avenues for growth and development. Moreover, the article addresses political transitions in the South Caucasus, advocating for democratic consolidation and pragmatic diplomacy and emphasizing the imperative of adaptation to a rapidly changing global order.

Mitat Çelikpala brings the Turkish perspective into the regional complexities of the South Caucasus following the Second Karabakh War and Russia's

invasion of Ukraine. With Azerbaijan's successful liberation of its occupied territories, a new era has emerged, reshaping regional power dynamics and diminishing Russia's influence. Against this backdrop, Türkiye's role in the region has become increasingly prominent, driven by its historical ties and strategic interests. Ankara's approach, characterized by a pragmatic blend of economic cooperation, military assistance, and diplomatic initiatives, aims to consolidate regional stability and advance its geopolitical objectives. The article underscores the importance of achieving lasting peace in the region, prioritizing comprehensive negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia while advocating for increased connectivity and economic integration. It also emphasizes the need for Ankara to navigate carefully, balancing its relationships with regional actors and non-regional powers to seize the opportunities presented by the evolving geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus.

Zaur Shiriyev explores the potential implications of a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia from the prism of Baku. While the recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh has set the stage for renewed peace talks, crucial issues such as border demarcation and regional connectivity remain unresolved. The prospect of a comprehensive peace deal presents an opportunity to transform the region, but careful negotiation is essential to avoid a 'cold peace' that merely maintains the status quo. The article emphasizes the need for the South Caucasus countries to take ownership of their disputes and work towards solutions through local cooperation and consultation, highlighting the importance of building trust and addressing mutual interests to foster lasting peace and regional normalization. Emphasis is made on the necessity to open the borders and institutionalize new trade and connectivity routes in the context of a post-war peaceful settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Richard Giragosian steps in with the analysis of Armenia's strategic reorientation away from reliance on Russia towards diversifying its security partners and allies, spurred by the realization of Moscow's unreliability following the 2020 war with Azerbaijan and the subsequent loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. Giragosian argues that Armenia must navigate a delicate balance between maintaining its relationship with Russia and pursuing closer ties with the West, leveraging its increased strategic significance and democratic legitimacy. The article also emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation, particularly in restoring trade and transport links, as a crucial avenue for post-war stability and economic growth in the region.

Mustafa Aydın reverts back to the analysis of profound geopolitical transformations in the Caucasus and Türkiye following the Second Karabakh War, highlighting Türkiye's resurgence, the weakening of Western influence, and the emergence of a Russian-Turkish partnership. According to the author, Azerbaijan's victory reshaped the region, bolstering its position and altering the territorial status quo, while Armenia faces a decline in power and influence. Russia aims to solidify its military and security role in the region despite challenges from Türkiye, Iran, and China. Türkiye's strategic position is strengthened by its close ties with Azerbaijan and Georgia and its military presence in Azerbaijan, aligning with its goal of becoming a transit hub for the region. The aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine further complicates the regional dynamics, presenting both risks and opportunities for the South Caucasus countries. Türkiye's potential role as a balancing power against Russia underscores the evolving power struggles in the region, with its actions hinging on Russia's strength post-war and Türkiye's strategic priorities.

Grigol Mgaloblishvili, former Prime Minister of Georgia and ex-ambassador to Türkiye gives his opinion on the transformative impact of Türkiye's 2024 municipal elections on the country's geopolitical landscape and its regional implications. These elections, though typically less significant than national ones, mark a turning point in Türkiye's political trajectory, signaling a decline in the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) long-standing dominance. President Erdoğan, once considered politically invincible, suffered a notable setback as his party lost ground to the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), and faced challenges from the emerging conservative Islamist party, New Welfare (YR). The article explores how these electoral outcomes not only affect Erdoğan's domestic political calculations but also have implications for Türkiye's foreign policy choices, particularly its relationship with the West. Additionally, the article discusses the broader regional implications of the elections, offering insights for opposition forces in neighboring countries, including Georgia, as they navigate their own political landscapes.

Jaba Devdariani continues with the argument that the 'Autumn of the Sovereignist Patriarchs' is approaching, with the authoritarian strongmen losing grounds in a wider region, from the South Caucasus to Eastern Europe. The rise of authoritarianism, characterized by a blend of conservatism, religious fundamentalism, and xenophobia, challenges liberal norms in the regions, giving rise to autocratic leaders who exploit these issues for the purpose of keeping power. Recent events, including the ousting of Plahotniuc in Moldova, the electoral defeat of Erdoğan in Türkiye, and strong resistance to Orbán in Hungary, suggest a turning tide against autocratic populism. However, the path forward remains uncertain, with the challenges of democratic forces ranging from institutional capture to geopolitical pressures shaping

the region's political trajectory. As citizens face stark choices between democracy and authoritarianism, the resilience of the people, the outcome of crucial elections, and international support for democratic institutions and actors will determine the region's future direction.

Sergi Kapanadze zooms in on Georgia, analyzing the recent U-turn of the country's foreign policy away from the West and towards Russia, spearheaded by the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream party. Despite widespread domestic opposition and warnings from the EU and the USA, the ruling Georgian Dream party reintroduced a controversial law on foreign agents, reminiscent of Russian legislation, aimed at shutting down and shutting up civil society and free media. This move has sparked unprecedented nationwide protests and raised concerns about Georgia's democratic future and European path. The article explores the motivations behind these actions, including the role of Russia, the oligarch's interests, election-resulted calculations, and potential responses from the West, such as the necessity of targeted sanctions and continuous support for civil society.

Shota Gvineria picks up with the analysis of Georgia's resilience against Russian hybrid warfare tactics amid the invasion of Ukraine. He overviews Russia's historical use of psychological pressure and support for anti-democratic forces in Georgia, highlighting the ruling party's shift towards policies aligning with Russian interests. The article identifies three key indicators of increased Russian influence: the uncontrolled influx of Russian migrants, growing economic dependency on Russia, and the adoption of Russian authoritarian governance practices. While public opinion in Georgia remains resilient to Russian information warfare, the article warns of the potential consequences of anti-democratic legislation on civil society. It calls for preemptive sanctions by the West to uphold Georgia's pro-

Western orientation and protect its national interests against growing Russian influence.

Vano Chkhikvadze looks at the region from a different prism – that of the Eastern Partnership, the EU policy towards the Eastern neighbors, turning 15 years this May. The author analyzes whether the Eastern Partnership is still relevant or already redundant. Initially designed to deepen political and economic ties between the EU and its eastern neighbors, the EaP has seen mixed success. While it facilitated significant progress for countries like Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, recent developments suggest a shift in focus, with these states now pursuing EU accession, leaving the EaP behind them. Meanwhile, remaining partners like Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus have divergent interests, casting doubt on the EaP's efficacy. Despite its challenges, the article suggests potential avenues for revitalizing the EaP, including extending visa liberalization to Armenia and strategically engaging with regional power dynamics, such as competition from Russia, China, and Türkiye. Ultimately, it emphasizes the need for the EU to adapt its approach to remain involved and influential in the Eastern Partnership region.

Thornike Gordadze closes the analysis of the Caucasus affairs with a look towards the North Caucasus. He explores the historical and contemporary relationship between Georgia and the North Caucasus, emphasizing Georgia's missed opportunities to support the region's quest for less Russian influence. It begins by recounting the significant historical ties between Georgia

and the North Caucasus, highlighting Georgia's previous support for Chechen independence and its recognition of the Circassian genocide. However, it argues that the current Georgian government, focused on appeasing Russia, has shifted away from this traditional stance, fostering collaboration with Moscow and neglecting its potential role in supporting North Caucasian liberation movements. Despite Georgia's historical significance and positive perceptions among North Caucasians, the article laments the government's failure to leverage this influence, ultimately undermining the region's aspirations for freedom and independence.

Analysis of the Caucasus affairs in one volume is an impossible task, and numerous important aspects are neither covered nor touched on. For instance, we did not discuss the trends in the occupied Georgian regions – Abkhazia and South Ossetia – or the role of Iran in the region. Neither could we cover the rising Chinese interests. A number of issues that are relevant today, such as the fight for the European future by Georgians, the strive for more connectivity and Western attention by Armenians, and an interest in peaceful coexistence and economic opening by the Azerbaijanis, might become *fait accompli* tomorrow, depending on how the games in regional and global chessboards develop. But one thing is sure – these games will have winners and losers, and a draw is highly unlikely ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

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Reformatting the South Caucasus

The World Around

The multitude of conflicts around the globe since the beginning of the 21st century has not fundamentally altered the international system established after World War II or during the post-Cold War era. However, in the last couple of years, we have witnessed conflicts likely to have profound implications for global and regional affairs, institutions, and fundamental perceptions of security and development.

While warfare in the early 21st century often involved disproportionately larger forces against terror networks or militarily inferior adversaries like ISIS or Houthi forces, as well as smaller infighting groups in Africa, today we are witnessing major full-scale confrontations such as the conflict in Ukraine involving nuclear power. Additionally, there is the possibility of a larger-scale confrontation between Israel and Iran. These conflicts are not only altering existing military strategies and

serving as a test ground for a new generation of weaponry but are also likely to reshape the world order and determine a new one. While it is premature to predict precisely how the world or global institutions will look after these conflicts come to some resolution, we can already speculate about their impact and the options available on regional and local levels.

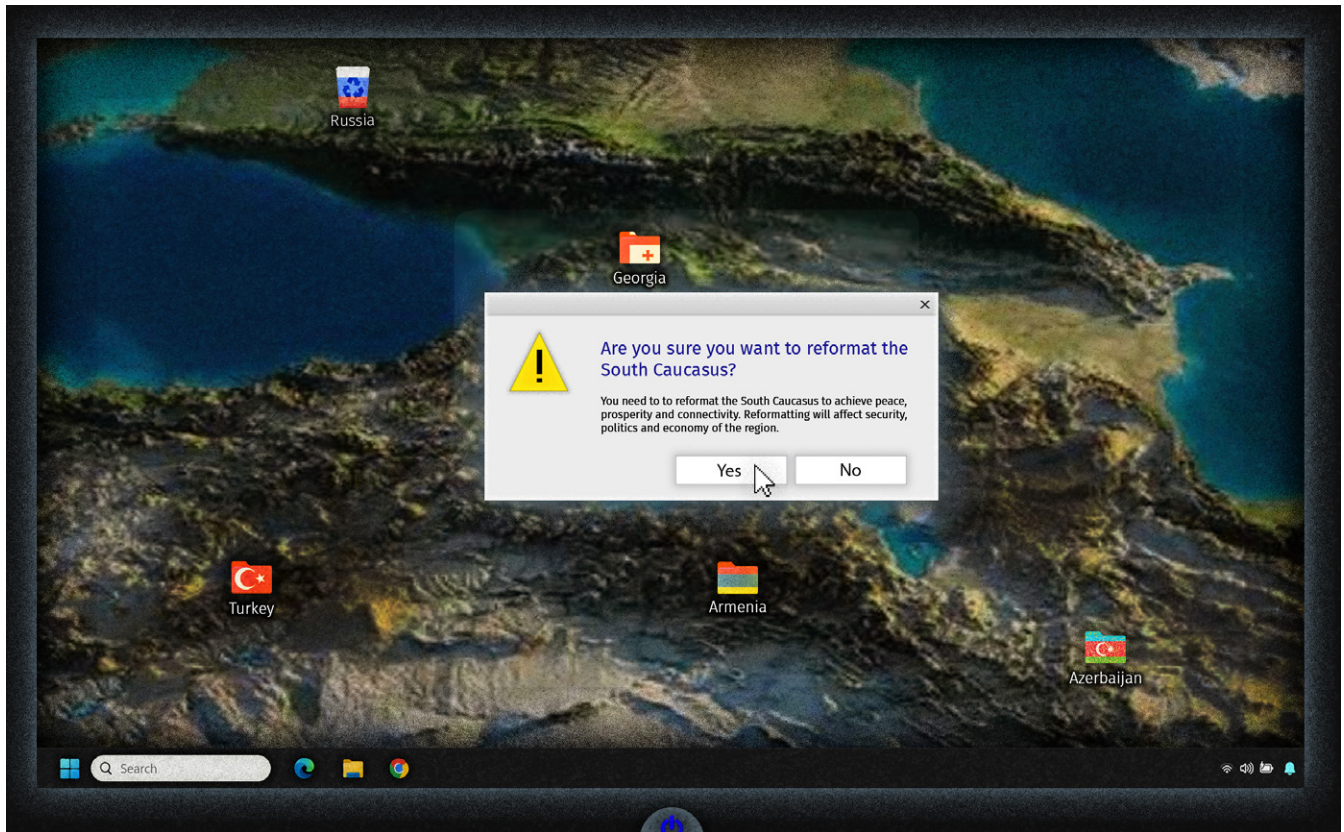
The forceful regaining of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan has profoundly affected the South Caucasus region.

The forceful regaining of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan has profoundly affected the South Caucasus region, exposing the invalidity of seemingly established perceptions of statehood, security, and development priorities. The war in Ukraine is also expected to significantly impact the South Caucasus region, necessitating further adjustments and calibrations by regional decision-makers and ruling classes.



TEMURI YAKOBASHVILI
Contributor

Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili distinguishes himself as an accomplished leader in government, crisis management, and diplomacy. As the founder of TY Strategies LLC, he extends advisory services globally. A pivotal figure in co-founding the Revival Foundation, aiding Ukraine, and leading the New International Leadership Institute, Yakobashvili held key roles, including Georgia's Ambassador to the U.S. and Deputy Prime Minister. With the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, he is a Yale World Fellow, trained at Oxford and Harvard. As a co-founder and chair of the Governing Board of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, he actively contributes to global media discussions on regional security. His significant contributions have merited the Presidential Medal of Excellence.



How Many Are They?

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia emerged as independent states and rightful participants in the international system. However, on the ground, these states soon began to exhibit multiple “personalities.” For instance, Armenia comprises the Armenian state, The Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (NKR or “Artsakh”), and the Armenian diaspora. Similarly, Azerbaijan is composed of de facto Azerbaijan without the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent territories, de jure Azerbaijan within internationally recognized borders, and an Ethnic Azerbaijan (including ethnic Azerbaijani minorities in Iran as well as the Pan Turkic family). Georgia, on the other hand, was fragmented from the beginning by losing effective control of most parts of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) regions.

At first glance, this division may seem artificial, but in reality, all these elements were integral parts of the statehood of these countries. For example, in

Armenia, all three elements were interlinked and greatly intertwined, to the extent that two previous presidents of Armenia used to be “Presidents of Artsakh.” Dominant priorities for the influential diaspora were heavily focused on issues beyond but in parallel with the Armenian state, such as the recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915 and the Artsakh issue. Similarly, the agenda of regaining NKR and other territories served as a major defining factor for the Azerbaijani state, with relations with the “metropolis of the Turkic world” – the Turkish Republic – becoming a decisive element for military victory.

Before the Russian Federation fully occupied Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, Georgia used to control (directly or indirectly) some parts of these provinces. This profoundly affected the functioning of the Georgian state, even negatively in some cases, such as when the Tskhinvali region served as a major hub for smuggling goods, heavily affecting the Georgian economy.

Current realities, such as Azerbaijan's accomplishment of restoring its territorial integrity, Russia's recognition of the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region as independent states, and Armenia's loss of Artsakh, require new thinking and probably new approaches from the political, intellectual, and business elites of all the South Caucasus countries. A comprehensive overhaul must address three main areas: politics, security, and the economy.

Security

Amid the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, it is challenging to provide definitive answers, but it is essential to evaluate major trends in the field of security. Conflicts in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine, and Israel underscore two crucial aspects of any country's security arrangements: resilience and technology. Resilience not only refers to the population's ability to withstand adversity but also to the state's capacity to procure and produce sufficient and relevant military equipment and ammunition to avoid attrition risks. A technological edge can be invaluable when facing adversaries with superior numbers or equipment. While we may not yet witness a new arms race, there is undoubtedly a widespread race for technologically advanced weaponry.

Azerbaijan was likely the first country to fully leverage the capabilities of precise intelligence integrated with firepower, particularly through the use of UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) during large-scale kinetic warfare. It successfully employed "kamikaze" drones and other loitering ammunition. While many of these technologies were acquired through direct military procurement from Türkiye and Israel, Azerbaijan has also developed a formidable military industry domestically. However, Ukraine has become a testing ground for all new technologies, and what Azerbaijan discovered as useful several years ago is now widely

known, diversified, and actively used on the battlefield, albeit with advanced countermeasures such as better electronic warfare equipment and new military tactics. Currently, Azerbaijan enjoys a close alliance with Türkiye, a country with the largest army in Europe, but maintaining such a balance may change, and Azerbaijan should seek less dependence on a single ally.

Azerbaijan enjoys a close alliance with Türkiye, the largest army in Europe, but maintaining such a balance may change, and Azerbaijan should seek less dependence on a single ally.

Armenia's recent actions regarding security arrangements indicate that it has learned valuable lessons from its recent defeat. Armenia is not only questioning the effectiveness of its overreliance on Russia and Russo-centric military institutions like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) but is actively pursuing policies to distance itself from both. Military procurements have shifted from Russia to India and, more recently, to France, which can offer cutting-edge technologies. Armenia has signed agreements with French companies like *Thales*, a leader in the military industry, and these steps are likely just the beginning. The powerful Armenian diaspora can play a crucial role not only in opening doors but also in providing funds for such purchases. If this trend continues, we can expect to see a much more technologically advanced and combat-capable military in the next five to ten years.

With proper policies and actions from the Georgian side, this national aspiration may become a reality sooner rather than later.

Georgia's lessons learned have perhaps been better applied by other countries, including Russia,

but the “Westernization” of the Georgian armed forces appears to be an irreversible trend. Simultaneously, nearly 2,000 Georgians have gained first-hand knowledge of modern warfare by fighting on Ukraine’s side. Geopolitical shifts make Georgia’s bid for The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership more realistic than ever. With proper policies and actions from the Georgian side, this national aspiration may become a reality sooner rather than later. Georgia in NATO (and the EU) would have much better chances of restoring its territorial integrity and focusing on its political and economic development under the most potent security umbrella.

Economy

Given global economic trends, data-related technologies are undeniably dominant factors. None of the three South Caucasian states has the capacity to host their own “Silicon Valley” or become a “Startup Nation,” but this doesn’t diminish the importance of other factors for their economic growth. Energy is as crucial as data.

Despite doomsday scenarios predicting the “death of hydrocarbons,” oil and gas remain essential factors in the global energy balance and will continue to be so with some modifications. Natural gas is particularly desirable, and with existing pipeline systems, Azerbaijan has a secure position in this regard. As for oil, history reminds us of the invention of benzene when the proliferation of electricity drastically decreased kerosene consumption. It remains to be seen what is next for the oil business, but byproducts of refineries, such as petrochemicals or lubricants, remain in high demand. Additionally, Azerbaijan has begun exploring the production of hydrogen, allegedly the “fuel of the future,” derived from natural gas. Therefore, with relevant modifications, the oil and gas industries will remain significant sources of income for Azerbaijan.

Armenia is still in the process of revamping its post-war economy, but the entrepreneurial spirit of the Armenian nation is well recognized.

Armenia is still in the process of revamping its post-war economy, but the entrepreneurial spirit of the Armenian nation is well recognized. Once a lasting peace agreement with Azerbaijan and normalization with Türkiye are achieved, two additional factors could significantly boost the Armenian economy: an attractive business environment and access to funds and investments. Armenia hosts the only nuclear power plant in the region and should not face energy shortages, which is crucial for the development of new industries. A combination of these factors could unleash entrepreneurship to its full capacity, leading to an Armenian economic miracle.

Georgia’s economic development has vast room for improvement and great potential. Rapid economic growth achieved after the Rose Revolution was slowed down by the war with Russia and the one-man-centric economy of the current government. Significant projects, such as the Anaklia Port on the Black Sea, hold promise for significant transportation infrastructure, not only for Georgia but for the entire Caucasus and Central Asia. Additionally, Georgia has profound potential to generate cheap electricity through hydroelectric power plants. Manufacturing facilities of the future are predicted to thrive where energy is cheap, infrastructure is developed, and access to maritime routes is guaranteed – conditions that Georgia can provide with the right leadership and motivation.

Meanwhile, traditional industries such as agriculture, tourism, and transportation will remain relevant for the South Caucasian states for decades to come. The suggested innovations will leverage existing potential and bring additional income and prosperity to the region.

Politics

Initially, all three South Caucasian states began as presidential republics, but Armenia and Georgia have since transitioned to parliamentary democracies, where prime ministers wield greater power than presidents. Despite exhibiting tendencies of semi-authoritarianism, this is symptomatic of countries in transition.

For Georgia to integrate properly into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions, it must inevitably shed these tendencies. The current situation suggests that if upcoming elections are conducted freely and fairly, no major political force can form a new government without a coalition with other parties. This trend is likely to remain relevant for decades.

Armenia has a vibrant opposition, but much of its political discourse is overshadowed by military defeat and historical glories.

Armenia has a vibrant opposition, but much of its political discourse is overshadowed by military defeat and historical glories. Achieving peace with Azerbaijan and Türkiye could shift the discourse towards more pragmatic and forward-looking discussions on Armenian state development, leading to increased democracy and a more sustainable political system.

Azerbaijan's current leadership is still in the process of what could be termed "social entrepreneurship," which involves developing social cohesion, resisting the influence of radical Islam, and crafting new narratives for national unity. Quick strides towards fully functioning democracy are still a work in progress for Azerbaijan. Never-

theless, the sustainability of the political process will require workable plans for the succession of power. Currently, the overwhelming popularity of President Ilham Aliyev gives him carte blanche to lead this process in a manner that mirrors the changing world around Azerbaijan.

Bright Future?

The thoughts presented here reflect on opportunities and are just one of many scenarios that could unfold. None of them is automatic, inevitable, or guaranteed. Much will depend on the outcome of the war in Ukraine, the aggressiveness of the West in pursuing its declared foreign policy objectives, and the reaction from the "global south."

It is probable that we will see attempts to reorganize and adjust existing global and regional institutions to accommodate emerging realities, which will be projected onto the South Caucasus. Humanity is entering a new era, also necessitating a recalibration of attitudes from all three republics of the South Caucasus.

At this moment, all three states are experiencing the need to "reinvent" their statehood, discard the phantoms of the past, and adapt to the rapidly changing world around them. The new, globalized generation will eventually engage in discussions about their future, and this article serves as a "teaser" for them as well as for current political, intellectual, and business elites. As my aviator friend always claims, "Airplanes fly not only because of the rules of physics but also because of the rules of commerce." In the same vein, the republics of the South Caucasus should be aware that their viability and functioning are influenced not only by their mere membership in the international system but also by the role and function they play within this system ■

Toward a Bright or Bleak Future in the South Caucasus

The geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus has changed following the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and Russia's assault on Ukraine in 2022. The transformed regional and global landscape enabled Azerbaijan to liberate all its occupied territories, including Karabakh proper, in September 2023.

As Azerbaijan has restored its territorial integrity, Armenia has emerged as a defeated actor after the war. A new era has thus dawned in the South Caucasus, although the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has yet to be settled with a peace treaty. One result of these developments is that Russia's regional influence has considerably [diminished](#). This can be attributed to Russia's inability to control or influence developments due to its long-term engagement in Ukraine. The longer the Russian war in Ukraine lasts, the less Russian influence there will be in the South Caucasus.

Under such circumstances, non-regional actors have taken the stage to advance the peace pro-

cess between Azerbaijan and Armenia since 2022. Their aim is purportedly to downgrade the Russian influence in the South Caucasus and incentivize integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical space. At the same time, the regional heavyweights, namely Türkiye and Iran, aspire to shape the balance in their favor.

Türkiye's Role in the Equation

Türkiye has had a prominent and decisive role in the South Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ankara's Western identity as a The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member, the positive effects of evolving bilateral relations with Russia, and its regional initiatives built over 30 years provide leverage for Ankara. Since the independence of those states, Ankara's South Caucasus policy has tried consistently to tilt the regional geopolitical balance in its favor. This pragmatic approach aligned its interests, whether Western or Russian, to serve its own agenda. To attain its objectives, Ankara pursues a policy based on the two pillars of 'regional ownership' and 'regional



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cooperation.’ In this vein, Ankara has prioritized economic and commercial aspects of its policy, including regional connectivity, since the 1990s. Energy cooperation has visibly been the driving force in this quest.

Türkiye has had a prominent and decisive role in the South Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During the 2010s, Ankara launched security and military cooperation in tandem with economic-commercial ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan. Pursuing such a diversified policy could shape the region’s future in a way that is different from the current one. If this goal is attained, it could further counterbalance the diminishing Russian influence and create new circumstances, allowing it to sideline it. The natural question in this context is whether Ankara could shepherd this transformation.

From Declarations of Independence to 2020s

Türkiye’s South Caucasus policy has always centered on Azerbaijan since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The motto behind it is “One Nation, Two States.” Ankara saw Baku as the key to its South Caucasus policy and, beyond that, to the Turkic world. The geographical limitation in reaching Azerbaijan makes Georgia a priority partner for Ankara and Baku. Tbilisi’s aspiration to become an EU and NATO member and keep its distance from Moscow also made Ankara a priority partner for Tbilisi. Thus, a trilateral regional setting comprising Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia flourished in the early 2000s. This prepared the ground for launching infrastructure projects such as the *Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan*, the *Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum* pipeline, and the *Baku-Tbilisi-Kars* railway that deepened economic and commercial ties among the three actors and encouraged intensive political and economic relations.

Türkiye's South Caucasus policy has always centered on Azerbaijan since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In that setting, Armenia had become the lesser child of God. Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijan's territories was the main reason for the lack of diplomatic relations between Ankara and Yerevan. The genocide allegations by Armenia against Türkiye and the challenge posed by the Armenian diaspora have also helped impede ameliorating relations and thus rendered the impasse chronic.

Although the three cooperating actors in the region declared that trilateral cooperation was open to Armenia, with the proviso that it respects borders and territorial integrity in the Caucasus, no step was taken toward normalizing Türkiye-Armenia relations. Despite Ankara's regional diplomatic initiatives, such as the [Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform](#) and [the 3+3 initiatives](#) after Russia invaded Georgian territories and Türkiye's much hyped-up rapprochement initiative with Armenia in 2009, there was no positive development between Yerevan and Ankara/Baku. Faced with this stalemate, Türkiye changed its rhetoric and actions in the South Caucasus after 2010 and suspended relations with Armenia. Ankara, in turn, elevated its relations with Baku and signed a '[Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance Agreement](#)' with Azerbaijan on 16 August 2010. On 15 September 2010, bilateral ties were raised to a "strategic level" following the initiation of the Türkiye-Azerbaijan High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council. The Mutual Assistance Agreement complemented this strategic level partnership under the headings of 'Military-Political and Security Issues' and 'Military and Military-Technical Cooperation Issues.' When the 44-Day War started on 27 September 2020, the bilateral cooperation arrangement between Türkiye and Azerbaijan already involved military and defense industries.

Ankara ensured Baku had a well-trained army with high military capabilities and skills to act [independently](#). The Azerbaijani army has been equipped with various military hardware, including [UAVs](#). At the High-Level Strategic Council meeting in Baku in February 2020, President İlham Aliyev defined the nature of bilateral relations with [these words](#): "...the Azerbaijani state and people stand by the Turkish state and people in every issue at the regional and global levels." President Erdoğan responded to this assessment with "Karabakh is Azerbaijan!" and by uttering this remark, he green-lighted Türkiye's support for Azerbaijan's policy to liberate Karabakh. The most tangible outcome was [the Azerbaijan-Türkiye joint military exercises](#) between 29 July and 11 August 2020 in parallel with Russian-Armenian exercises. Following the liberation of Azerbaijan's occupied territories, bilateral relations between the two countries have further strengthened.

The most noteworthy step for Ankara was deploying a Turkish military contingency in Azerbaijan.

The military and security dimension of bilateral relations became more prominent in the post-war period. The most noteworthy step for Ankara was deploying a Turkish military contingency in Azerbaijan. Turkish troops started patrolling the liberated districts within [the Joint Turkish-Russian Monitoring Center](#), established together with Moscow. There were other significant developments in the military, defense, and economic fields between Ankara and Baku after the war. In the first four months of 2021, four joint exercises were held. These exercises aimed not only to coordinate joint action but also to remodel the Azerbaijani army so that it would emulate the structures and procedures of the Turkish armed forces. Accordingly, a roadmap for the modernization of the Azerbaijani army was initiated. In line with that, President Erdoğan approved the defense industry coopera-

tion with Azerbaijan on 6 April 2021. However, the crown in the jewel was the signing of the [Shusha Declaration](#) on 15 June 2021.

This Declaration is the document that has defined Türkiye and Azerbaijan as allies. It is a declaration of intent by the two parties to fully support each other on issues of common interest at all international platforms, including regional organizations and initiatives. It is considered a solidification of the “one nation-two states” narrative adopted by Ankara and Baku in the early 1990s. The declaration also transcends bilateral relations and expands into the South Caucasus. The parties have declared that their primary aim was normalizing ties among the regional states, consolidating regional stability and security, restoring all relations in the fields of economy and transportation with other regional actors, and ensuring long-term peace. This can be read as a reflection of Ankara’s desire to play a more active and constructive role in shaping the future of the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan remains the pivot of this objective. In this context, the pertinent question is how to position Georgia and Armenia in Ankara’s new South Caucasus policy.

The Search for Post-War Order and Ankara’s Priorities

As of 2024 and beyond, Ankara’s goals and priorities for the region are as follows:

- Establishing permanent regional peace;
- Further improving political relations with the entire Caucasus within the framework of Regional Ownership;
- Developing connectivity projects to deepen economic and trade relations throughout the Caucasus;
- Energizing security-oriented regional initiatives/institutions to develop mutual confidence-building measures for sustained regional security and stability;

- Further access to the Turkic world through diversified and enduring networks.

As in the case of Ukraine, Ankara places its interests, expectations, and priorities at the center of its policies and thus attempts to balance all other non-regional actors accordingly.

Achieving these goals necessitates developing a carefully balanced and pragmatic strategy. Demonstrating the degree of pragmatism means acting as a Western actor while keeping Russia and Iran in the loop as necessary. Such a calibrated approach has sometimes drawn harsh criticism from Türkiye’s Western allies. Still, Ankara has been assertive in presenting it as a renewed vision for the region. [As in the case of Ukraine](#), Ankara places its interests, expectations, and priorities at the center of its policies and thus attempts to balance all other non-regional actors accordingly. This is a challenging effort that requires pursuing prudent, rational, and dynamic policies.

Utmost Interest: Establishing Lasting Regional Peace

Regarding its political position in the post-war environment, Ankara is not a neutral actor. Ankara’s approach, in line with Baku’s expectations, is to achieve lasting peace through comprehensive negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. To that end, Türkiye has welcomed the ‘Armenia-Azerbaijan Commission on Delimitation and Demarcation.’

In the immediate aftermath of the war, expectations were for a simultaneous Türkiye-Armenia rapprochement and an Azerbaijan-Armenia Peace Treaty. For Ankara, this policy morphed into ‘Azerbaijan-Armenia peace first, followed by Turkish-Armenian rapprochement.’ This may be due to

Azerbaijan's desire to push Yerevan to first focus on signing a lasting peace agreement with Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani side sees the current impasse in Turkish-Armenian relations as leverage against Yerevan and seeks not to lose this leverage before signing a deal with Yerevan.

On the other hand, Ankara closely follows the initiatives undertaken by the US, the EU, and Russia in the peace process. A "Baku-first" preference again shapes Türkiye's approach towards these initiatives. Ankara openly criticizes any initiative of the EU and the US that focuses solely on Armenia, leaving Azerbaijan outside. That explains why Türkiye has criticized the outcome of the trilateral meeting between Armenia, the US, and the EU on 5 April in Brussels. [On that note](#), Ankara has characterized this meeting as incompatible with neutrality, which could delay or impede lasting peace. It, therefore, urged a dialogue that includes Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan should rapidly reach an agreement with Armenia to safeguard the interests of its Turkish partner.

Another critical step that would radically reshape the overall landscape in the South Caucasus would be the normalization of Türkiye-Armenia relations. Eventually, this is essential for contributing to lasting peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia that suits Turkish interests. Some modest steps were taken to this effect after the 44-day war. [Special envoys were appointed](#), and routine bilateral talks were revived. Türkiye lifted the ban on direct air cargo flights and resumed civilian flights between Armenia and Türkiye in 2022. Pashinyan attended Erdoğan's presidential inauguration ceremony. Armenia's foreign minister attended the Diplomacy Forum in Antalya. In February 2023, the Turkish-Armenian border, which remained closed for 30 years, was opened for humanitarian aid following the earthquake that hit Southeast-

ern Anatolia. Although these positive steps raised expectations, Türkiye-Armenia normalization has not yet been achieved. As things stand now, normalization seems to hinge on the signing of the Azerbaijan-Armenia peace deal. In that respect, Azerbaijan should rapidly reach an agreement with Armenia to safeguard the interests of its Turkish partner. The current impasse in normalizing Turkish-Armenian relations will not be helpful for Azerbaijan or Türkiye in the near future.

Establishing Complex Regional Political Networks

Against this backdrop, Ankara's primary concern is avoiding another potential instability in the Caucasus due to the spillover effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ankara should take the initiative to build an all-Caucasian regional enterprise, in which Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, are able to find refuge. The idea to relaunch the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, like the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC), should be conceived under different parameters in its current situation. Such a structure will ensure that regional issues are addressed primarily by the parties to the current disputes so that they can be resolved over time based on regional cooperation. Finally, exploring the means of incorporating the Turkic world into this inclusive structure could be a long-term challenge to address.

Increasing Connectivity: Economic and Trade Relations

Trade and economic relations are essential to achieve political and security-oriented objectives. The South Caucasus already has a basic infrastructure built in the last decade. Overhauling and renewing the Soviet-era infrastructure in connectivity projects would give a critical impulse to peace and prosperity in the whole region. The extensive

land (railways, highways), sea (Caspian, Black Sea, and Aegean-Mediterranean), air, digital, and energy connectivity between Türkiye, Georgia, and Azerbaijan must include Armenia. Taking concrete steps in this direction, whether under the name of the Zangezur, the Aras, or the Yerevan proposed Crossroads for Peace project, would contribute to regional cooperation and stability. Such connectivity projects should be designed to be integral components of the Middle Corridor, thereby linking the region to European markets via Türkiye. They would ultimately serve as alternative and transit channels to already established connectivity projects controlled by Russia or Iran.

President [Erdogan's positive statement](#) on the Aras Corridor linking Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan through Iran could reflect such a perspective. An integrated web of connectivity projects would also provide access to Central and Asian markets via the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route.

[The EU has recently announced the allocation](#) of EUR 10 billion to develop this massive connectivity construct, which would circumvent Russian infrastructure. With this EU investment initiative, 33 infrastructure projects focusing on railroads are earmarked for financing. It must be kept in mind that Azerbaijan, with Ankara's support, has become an essential actor in European energy markets since the mid-2000s with projects such as TANAP and TAP. Despite political problems, Baku already has strategic partnership agreements with almost a third of the EU members. It sells natural gas to Bulgaria, Italy, and Greece, albeit in smaller

quantities. Agreements with Romania and Hungary have opened new vistas for the future.

The interconnection of regional infrastructures, the establishment of free trade zones, priority, and tax-free trade areas (especially in light of Armenia's agreements with the US and Türkiye and Georgia's agreements with the EU), and the launch of logistics centers through the signing of free trade agreements would firmly anchor the Caucasus to the global system and bring peace and prosperity to the region.

Russian political influence is at the lowest level in this equation, and Moscow is politically ineffective in the South Caucasus.

In short, a clear window of opportunity has already opened in front of Türkiye, especially amid the uncertainty created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Russian political influence is at the lowest level in this equation](#), and Moscow is politically ineffective in the South Caucasus. Russia's role is up for debate even in Armenia. Ankara can turn this into an advantage by bringing the Caucasus trio around the tangible all-regional projects and promoting lasting peace. This requires taking comprehensive and balanced steps and shaping a visionary and participatory South Caucasus policy. Ankara can only move in this direction if Armenia joins as a constructive and equal partner as Baku and Tbilisi have been over the last 30 years. Otherwise, the open window of opportunity may close and never be reopened ■

Could an Azerbaijan-Armenia Peace Deal “Normalize” the South Caucasus?

Last year, Azerbaijan took back the last Armenian-occupied parts of its territory in the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, some of which it had already regained in 2020. While this has left Armenia stunned and recovering from its losses, the forceful resolution of this thorniest issue between the two hostile neighbours has actually made a peace deal between them more possible than it has been in over 30 years.

The future of the wider region depends on the quality of this elusive peace deal.

However, the future of the wider region depends on the quality of this elusive peace deal. A poorly cobbled-together agreement could remove the immediate threat of further armed conflict but leave room for future disagreement over the exact line of the Azerbaijani-Armenian border.

A bad deal could also do nothing to unblock trade routes across the region, long thwarted by closed borders that are a massive hindrance to economic development not only for Armenia but also for Georgia, Azerbaijan, and other neighbors.

The most contentious issue here is the oversight of goods and people transiting Armenia between Azerbaijan and its western exclave of Nakhchivan.

The South Caucasus countries must stop looking to outsiders to help them solve their disputes.

The South Caucasus countries must stop looking to outsiders to help them solve their disputes and try to work out their own small steps to increase confidence, such as starting a trilateral cooperation in various sectors and on issues of common interest.



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Avoiding a “Cold Peace” Could Transform the South Caucasus

Regional tensions rose when Azerbaijan took back most of the Armenian-occupied territory in and around the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast in 2020. But even while their military forces stayed on high alert, politicians on both sides pressed for a peace deal and raised hopes one might be signed in [2022](#) or [2023](#). It was not. Maybe they had talked it up too much or maybe their populations failed to grasp how complicated it is to negotiate the terms of a peace agreement.

One easy — and common — path to any peace or ceasefire deal is to fudge the problematic bits and include intentionally constructively ambiguous provisions just to get something agreed upon. Based on its previous experience, Azerbaijan was especially cautious to avoid this in 2022-2023. The

2020 ceasefire agreement that ended the Second Karabakh War included several provisions interpreted differently by each side, illustrating that such an approach may not bring meaningful progress.

In September 2023, after three decades, Azerbaijan reestablished its sovereignty over all parts of Karabakh. This led to 100,000 ethnic Armenians fleeing to Armenia, driven by security concerns and a longstanding refusal, often [echoed](#) by self-proclaimed Armenian leaders, to live under Azerbaijani authority. Yet, at the same time, this new reality swept away perhaps the most challenging issue in peace talks. Yerevan had demanded assurances over the rights and security of the local Karabakh Armenians, which Azerbaijan refused to discuss, saying it was an internal issue.

Now, the Karabakh issue is gone, and despite Armenia's outrage, this has brought new momen-

tum to the negotiations. Peace talks have usually been mediated by third parties such as the European Union, but, for the first time, officials from Baku and Yerevan have met on their own, and this has delivered results. One such success was an [agreement](#) on 7 December 2023, where the sides exchanged detainees. Armenia withdrew its veto against Baku hosting the COP29 global environment summit in November 2024, and Baku supported Yerevan's bid to host a regional office for that summit. It was the first time both countries refrained from vetoing and instead actively supported each other in international forums.

This new momentum has led to the expectation that a peace agreement is now more attainable as Azerbaijan begins to acknowledge the existence of a “de facto peace.”

This new momentum has led to the expectation that a peace agreement is now more attainable as Azerbaijan begins to acknowledge the existence of a [“de facto peace.”](#) However, two highly contentious issues remain: establishing principles for determining the exact border between both sides and addressing connectivity - opening trade and transport routes across the region that are stifled by Armenia's closed borders with Türkiye to the west and Azerbaijan to the east.

These issues must not be side-stepped if the peace deal is to be a full success.

If the parties, only for the sake of signing the agreement, omit references to these matters or fail to establish principles on how to resolve them – especially regarding connectivity, this is likely to lead to a ‘cold peace.’ This might eliminate the threat of war and affirm fundamental principles, including territorial and diplomatic recognition, but would risk cementing a new and unsatisfactory status quo in the region.

It would complicate the task of ‘normalizing’ the South Caucasus, which means fostering significant cooperation among Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, with open borders and trade, and helping these countries avoid being used as an arena where the West and Russia fight out their geopolitical rivalry which has escalated since Russia invaded Ukraine two years ago.

On the other hand, a comprehensive and forward-looking peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia - which properly defines the common border and opens up trade and free movement - could avoid such a ‘cold peace’ and be a real opportunity for the region.

Demarcating the Border

The collapse of the Soviet Union turned a largely administrative boundary into an international one for the two South Caucasus republics along an over 1,000 km-long joint border. However, the exact path of that line was not delimited and demarcated at the time and remains so today. A Border Commission from both sides is trying to find an agreed frontier, but neither side can even decide which maps should be used for the starting point. Yerevan favors the USSR General Staff map from 1974-1976 and wants a third-party arbiter to resolve any disputes that the two cannot sort out alone. Baku says that relying on a single map (which it thinks favors Armenia) is [unjustifiable](#). It argues for considering all relevant maps and technical documents from Soviet times and is against any third-party involvement in dispute resolution, saying this would unnecessarily empower an outside arbiter and delay progress if either side calls them during the slightest disagreement.

“Enclave and exclave villages” – left stranded in the “wrong” country by Soviet-era administrators seeking a tidier border – add to the problems. Armenia controls four enclave and four exclave

Azerbaijani villages whereas Azerbaijan has one Armenian exclave village. In addressing the situation of exclave villages, neither side appears to be in a hurry to implement a conventional resolution. Nonetheless, they are open to exploring alternative solutions, including the potential exchange of these exclaves, an option neither side has dismissed. However, this could take years and may only be finalized at the end of the border demarcation process, whereas Azerbaijan has demanded the [immediate return](#) of its four enclave villages. Over the last two months, from March to April, the State Commissions on the Delimitation of the State Border between Armenia and Azerbaijan have discussed this issue extensively. During a meeting on 19 April 2023, they [reached](#) an agreement to begin the first practical border delimitation and demarcation efforts, which entails the return of four enclave villages to Azerbaijan.

Armenia and Azerbaijan also disagree over the confidence-building steps. Yerevan says a peace accord must ensure that both sides pull their armed forces back from the border area. Baku says that in 2021 and 2022, during border clashes, Baku took some strategic heights inside Armenia but denies taking any Armenian territory and [opposes](#) the distancing of forces, arguing that any claims and counterclaims should be settled during the border delimitation.

Overall, it seems that both sides understand border demarcation will take a long time; hence, the Border Commission has held more frequent meetings since November 2023. These efforts suggest that, despite the complex issues, a mutually acceptable solution is possible.

In contrast, the connectivity issue, fraught with regional power rivalry and conflict of interests between Azerbaijan and Armenia, remains more contentious and politicized.

Contentious and Geopoliticized Connectivity

Connectivity means unblocking all economic and transport links between Azerbaijan and Armenia and with their neighbors. It has been on the agenda since 2020 after Azerbaijan regained most of the land lost to Armenia nearly three decades ago. While political factors and conflicts have historically dominated the design of South Caucasus connectivity, it has always been integral to the Azerbaijan-Armenian peace process, with the unblocking of railways and other connections frequently included in previous [peace proposals](#).

While political factors and conflicts have historically dominated the design of South Caucasus connectivity, it has always been integral to the Azerbaijan-Armenian peace process.

The 2020 ceasefire agreement included provisions to build transport links to connect Azerbaijan with its exclave, Nakhchivan, which lies on the other (western) side of Armenia and also borders Türkiye and Iran. Russian border troops were to be responsible for the security of this route through Armenia, which Baku calls the Zangezur corridor and considers essential. The exclave has been subject to an effective Armenian blockade since the early 1990s and can only be reached from Azerbaijan via a southern detour through Iran.

Under the 2020 ceasefire agreement, there was an element of reciprocity; Russian troops would control the route through Armenia between two parts of Azerbaijani territory in the same way that they kept a route (the Lachin route) open between Armenia and Armenian-populated Karabakh.

Yerevan's stance has hardened since Azerbaijan retook all Armenian-populated Karabakh, driven by growing dissatisfaction with Russia, which it accused of neglecting its security obligations.

But in April 2023, Azerbaijan started imposing its controls on the (now redundant) Lachin route. Consequently, Armenia now believes it should control security over the route to Nakhchivan, with Russia overseeing it. Yerevan's stance has hardened since Azerbaijan retook all Armenian-populated Karabakh, driven by growing dissatisfaction with Russia, which it accused of neglecting its security obligations under the 2020 ceasefire agreement, especially regarding the security of Karabakh Armenians.

Despite this, since September 2023, Azerbaijan and Armenia have made some progress in negotiations, discussing unblocking the wider region and enhancing connectivity by establishing rules. These principles — not just related to the Nakhchivan exclave — cover railways, highways, air traffic, and the transit of gas and electricity between the two countries, aiming to respect sovereignty, jurisdiction, equality, and reciprocity.

However, the major unresolved issue is how to reconnect Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan. Azerbaijan wants Azerbaijani passengers and goods passing between the two to have minimal contact with the Armenian side under the motto “from Azerbaijan to Azerbaijan.”

Azerbaijan also insists on additional clear principles regarding its connection with Nakhchivan in the peace agreement in addition to four already agreed principles: respecting sovereignty, jurisdiction, equality, and reciprocity.

Baku says that any deal should mirror provisions

of the 2020 ceasefire agreement on unimpeded connectivity. The international community has misinterpreted this as demanding Russian control. However, an alternative solution for the route's security might involve a neutral third party or private company during a transition period until relations with Armenia normalize.

Western countries see better South Caucasus transport routes as a way to reduce Russia's influence in Armenia.

Azerbaijan also wants to stop the issue from being hijacked by geopolitical tension and competition involving Russia, Iran, and the West. Western countries see better South Caucasus transport routes as a way to reduce Russia's influence in Armenia. Baku is reluctant to help the West without getting something in return, complaining that the West has done little to help rebuild Azerbaijan's previously occupied territories and instead favors Armenia, especially financially. Baku says it needs billions of dollars to help restore Azerbaijani cities destroyed and looted by the Armenians since the first Karabakh war in the 1990s.

Russia, although distracted by the war with Ukraine, is also jockeying for influence. If any country desires a form of ‘extraterritorial control’ — a notion often ascribed to Azerbaijan — it is Russia that aims to provide full security for the Nakhchivan route by itself.

Iran, on the other hand, opposes any such route, saying that it opposes ‘geopolitical change’ in the region. In reality, it opposes any development that would better link Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and by extension, Central Asia, as this would diminish Iran's economic benefits, such as transit fees.

These disagreements show that Russia or Iran could complicate or even undermine any agreement between Baku and Yerevan. To move for-

ward, Baku and Yerevan must not just agree on principles about connectivity but also find ways to implement them. They also agree on full respect for sovereignty and jurisdiction and on equality and reciprocity. However, 'reciprocity' could mean different things to different actors. Finding a common understanding of what these vague principles mean in practice and turning that agreement into concrete, implementable steps is a real challenge for both parties.

Normalization through Ownership

An Azerbaijan-Armenia peace agreement remains key to avoiding a 'cold peace,' the only way to normalize relations and the region. For Georgia, a neighbor with ethnic minorities from both, peace between Baku and Yerevan is crucial. Tbilisi has tried to boost confidence-building measures, such as facilitating the exchange of detainees and mine maps in [2021](#). It has also [reiterated](#) its offer of 'good offices' for peace negotiations. However, neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia sees the need for this right now, as they are talking directly. Nonetheless, prime ministers from the three countries met in [Georgia](#) in October 2023, a first and informal attempt at trilateral talks. More cooperation and consultations are needed to normalize the region and minimize any harm from regional and geopolitical rivalries.

Western countries hope to reduce Russian influence in the region and have encouraged Georgia's moves towards the European Union and Armenia's shift away from Russia.

So far, the only cooperation format discussed since 2020 is a regional framework, known as 3+3, involving the three regional countries and three regional powers - Iran, Russia, and Türkiye. Tbilisi dropped out, refusing to talk with Russia, which

occupies 20% of its territory (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). This format has not proved helpful as regional powers have different interests and face different challenges from the region's three countries. In addition, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has rendered the 3+3 (or, in practice, 3+2) format practically redundant. Western countries hope to reduce Russian influence in the region and have encouraged Georgia's moves towards the European Union and Armenia's shift away from Russia. The West's overtures to these two have, by design or default, made it harder to bring the three regional countries together since Azerbaijan does not seek EU integration and distances itself from sanctions and any other actions that may displease Russia.

The South Caucasus has a history of seeking help from outside to solve its disputes. The region has not yet tried to sort itself out on its own. It is time for the three countries to find solutions locally and take responsibility for themselves. Such an approach was nearly impossible in the past due to the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict, but now, as the two countries may be inching towards a peace agreement and normalizing relations, starting three-way cooperation and consultation could be a way forward.

This should start with minimal aims concerning issues of mutual interest ranging from economic, logistical, and trade to environment and energy. A model could be the cooperation format between Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Georgia where various ministry-level discussions have evolved. Discussions could start between, let us say, deputy ministers of energy and the environment, given that the high-profile COP29 will be held in Azerbaijan. The three countries could prioritize the environment and climate change, the two areas where the South Caucasus could develop a truly regional approach. Early trilateral cooperation could also look at trade and transport. Talking together and taking ownership of their problems would be a sign that the region can 'normalize' over time ■

Armenia's Strategic Reorientation

The South Caucasus has long been defined by dynamic geopolitical change and challenges. But the past several years have been marked by the most dramatic shifts in regional geopolitics. For Georgia, the course of reform and democratization has become beset by internal obstacles and serious setbacks well beyond the lingering geopolitical burden of the legacy of the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. Azerbaijan, for its part, has emerged as a more assertive and, at times, more aggressive geopolitical power, defeating Armenia in a 44-day 2020 war and seizing Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Against this significant shift in regional geopolitics, Armenia has weathered the most severe threats and embarked on the most decisive strategic reorientation.

Repercussions from Ukraine

The most notable element of this new geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus is the broader context of Russia's failed invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Obviously, Russia's aggression against Ukraine triggered much more profound repercussions far beyond the region. For the three countries of the South Caucasus, there were three important yet indirect considerations.

The first of these repercussions from Russia's failed invasion of Ukraine was the onset of an unusual period of Russian distraction as Moscow quickly became overwhelmed by its shock of military failure. Diversion of Moscow's attention elsewhere offered a rare respite for Russia's other neighbors. This distraction only downgraded other agenda items of Russian interest in the South Caucasus, from occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Nagorno Karabakh.

This period of Russian distraction or "geopolitical neglect" also encouraged Azerbaijan to rely on the force of arms in a display of geopolitical power projection to militarily move against Armenia and target the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Moscow can no longer hide the steady erosion of its capacity for force projection and the slow death of the "myth of Russian military might."

A second related element of the aftermath of the failed invasion of Ukraine was the military weakness of the much-vaunted Russian military power and prowess. The reaction to the rather surprisingly sudden and serious setbacks for Moscow was



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far-reaching, with a more realistic revelation from Central Asia to the South Caucasus of the weakness of the inherent threat of Russian hard power. This also means that Moscow can no longer hide the steady erosion of its capacity for force projection and the slow death of the “myth of Russian military might.”

Further, in assessing Azerbaijan’s military victory over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, Russia’s failure to deter Azerbaijan and the passive proximity of the Russian peacekeepers suggests complicity. In terms of power perception, however, Russian weakness in the face of the Azerbaijani use of force has been matched by Azerbaijan’s capability to challenge Russia. This is also seen in the embarrassing humiliation of the Russian peacekeepers, the challenge to Russia’s power and position in the South Caucasus, and Azerbaijan’s open defiance of Russia. Against that backdrop, Russia’s position in the South Caucasus is now one of weakness, not strength, and remains more insecure than self-confidence.

However, the broader context of regional geopolitics was observed on a different battlefield. This third factor stemmed from the “success” of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. More specifically, Moscow was quite successful in terms of three strategic outcomes. First, Russia was able to unite the West with a rare commitment to resolve. A second Russian achievement was seen in the immediate restoration of the geopolitical relevance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as [seen](#) more recently in the Finnish and Swedish accession to the alliance, as well as the validation of the [Georgian](#) and Ukrainian pursuit of NATO membership as the only way of ensuring security in the face of Russian expansionism.

Russia was also quite effective at demonstrating the imperative for its neighbors to strengthen their independence and sovereignty based on

self-sufficiency in the wake of Russian weakness.

Perhaps more significantly, Russia was also quite effective at demonstrating the imperative for its neighbors to strengthen their independence and sovereignty based on self-sufficiency in the wake of Russian weakness. This last factor only vindicated Georgia’s long-standing recognition of the Russian threat, a lingering legacy of the often-ignored lesson from Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia. It also encouraged Armenia to embark on its own strategic reorientation away from Russia in a pivot to the West.

Armenia’s New “Russia Challenge”

From an Armenian security perspective, the threat environment has long been clear. Situated in a threatening neighborhood, Armenia has become accustomed to being a prisoner of geography and a slave to geopolitics. The threat from Azerbaijan, with Türkiye’s unprecedented military backing for Baku, has been a constant concern. Yet even after the 2020 war with Azerbaijan (and largely also because of that war), Armenia is now facing a new [“Russia challenge,”](#) rooted in the mistake of believing in Moscow’s security promises. In fact, as the military defeat in the 2020 war and the 2023 loss of Karabakh have painfully revealed to Armenia, Russia is an unreliable country, deceptively posing as a partner.

This combination of Russia’s abandonment of Armenia, or even complicity with Azerbaijan against Armenia, with the hollow expectations of security from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), now clearly demonstrates that Yerevan stands alone. But this new painful Armenian [reality](#) has forged a new strategy for Armenia, seeking to “diversify” its security partners and allies.

For Armenia, this belated recognition of the limits

of its “partnership” with Russia was not new, given Russia’s arrogant neglect of Armenia. In fact, Russia’s only consistency in its policy toward Armenia has been one of inattention, not intervention, and of distraction, not determination, as Moscow has long taken Yerevan for granted, with Armenia receiving few, if any, tangible benefits. Of course, the question of how far and how fast Armenia can move closer to the West is a strategically critical question.

As Armenia seeks to resist the “gravitational pull” of the “Russian orbit,” timing is essential for two reasons. First, there is a window of opportunity due to Russia’s continued distraction and overwhelm by its failed invasion of Ukraine. Second, there is a related opening for Armenia based on unprecedented Western (and European) interest in Armenia. In this context, Armenia is now viewed as a partner that is both a more reliable democracy and endowed with more strategic significance than before.

The key is not to try to “replace” Russia with the West but rather to offset Russia by diversifying security partners and allies.

However, the key is not to try to “replace” Russia with the West but rather to offset Russia by diversifying security partners and allies. This requires Armenia to adopt a more sophisticated transactional strategy and a policy approach of bartering and bargaining with both Moscow and the West. This is obviously a difficult and even dangerous challenge, but it is even more dangerous not to try. Thus, the imperative for Armenia now centers on the need for strategic readjustment and reorientation. A pursuit of complementarity has long defined Armenian foreign policy as Yerevan sought a balance between its security partnership with Russia and its interest in deepening ties to the EU and the West. However, that policy has been diffi-

cult to maintain over the years, especially given the pre-existing trend of over-dependence on Russia. Obviously, Yerevan lacks the leverage to challenge Russia directly but can change the terms of that relationship. Armenian advantage comes from an endowment of increased strategic significance, a greater degree of stability and resilience, and a rare commodity of democratic legitimacy.

The Imperative of “Connectivity”

Currently, there is a rare opportunity for regional cooperation with the post-war geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus, which offers a degree of promise over peril. More specifically, this opportunity for regional cooperation stems from the outlook for restoring regional trade and transport.

Negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, formally coordinated by Russia, have advanced in the work of a tripartite working group on regional trade and transport. More specifically, the working group’s negotiations resulted in an important preliminary agreement reiterating and reaffirming Armenian sovereignty over all road and railway links between Azerbaijan and its exclave, Nakhchivan, through southern Armenia. The successful agreement over the restoration of regional trade and transport is limited to the links between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan as the first stage, however, with the planned reconstruction of the Soviet-era railway link and the construction of a highway through southern Armenia.

The broader second stage of regional trade and transport encompasses a more expansive and significantly more expensive strategy that includes the reopening of the closed border between Türkiye and Armenia and the restoration of the Soviet-era railway line between Kars and Gyumri as well as the eventual extension of the Azerbaijani railway network to allow Armenian rolling stock

from southern Armenia in a north-eastern direction through Baku and on to southern Russia.

The issue of restoring regional trade and transport is significant as the only clear example of a “win-win” scenario for post-war stability with the economic and trade opportunities significant for all countries in the region.

The issue of restoring regional trade and transport is significant as the only clear example of a “win-win” scenario for post-war stability with the economic and trade opportunities significant for all countries in the region. It is also crucial to re-

gain deterrence by forging economic interdependence to prevent renewed hostilities. In this way, financial incentives and trade opportunities have been elevated to a new and unprecedented degree of importance that has been long missing from the region.

What Comes Next?

Over the next few months, the post-war negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan are expected to accelerate in two core areas: border demarcation and the restoration of trade and transport. The primary driver for this acceleration of diplomatic engagement stems from two main factors. First, the Armenian concession over three border



Source: RFE/RL Graphics

villages in late April offers a new precedent of a successful, albeit partial, restoration of a key dispute over border delineation. This will only encourage Azerbaijan to remain committed to the process of border demarcation talks, especially as Russia is now less of a direct manager of the talks.

A second promising sign is Azerbaijan's move to lower its rhetoric and lessen its demands over the so-called "Zangezur Corridor." For its part, Azerbaijan is no longer demanding "extraterritoriality" or any such weakening of Armenian sovereignty over the road and railway planned to traverse southern Armenia and give Azerbaijan access to its exclave of Nakhchivan.

Azerbaijan's position continues to remain stubbornly maximalist, driven by domestic politics and defined by bellicose rhetoric.

Despite the likelihood of progress in the diplomatic negotiations, Azerbaijan's position continues to remain stubbornly maximalist, driven by domestic politics and defined by bellicose rhetoric. This only suggests that Baku will seek to secure ever more concessions from Yerevan, imposing a punitive post-war peace on its own terms, thereby only increasing the insecurity and instability of the South Caucasus ■

Changing Geopolitics of the Caucasus and Türkiye after the Double Wars

The Second Karabakh War marked a significant shift in the region's geopolitical dynamics, showcasing Türkiye's resurgence, Iran's diminishing role, the weakening of Western influence, and the emergence of a Russian-Turkish partnership in the South Caucasus.

Azerbaijan's victory in the war established its dominance in the political and military spheres, while Armenia's power and influence declined. Georgia faces the risk of marginalization from the regional processes if Azerbaijan and Armenia start successful cooperation. Both Russia and Türkiye increased their influence, with Russia deploying peacekeepers in Karabakh 30 years after its withdrawal from Azerbaijan and Türkiye establishing a military presence in Azerbaijan after a century. Thus, a new geopolitical whirlwind is blowing in the South Caucasus.

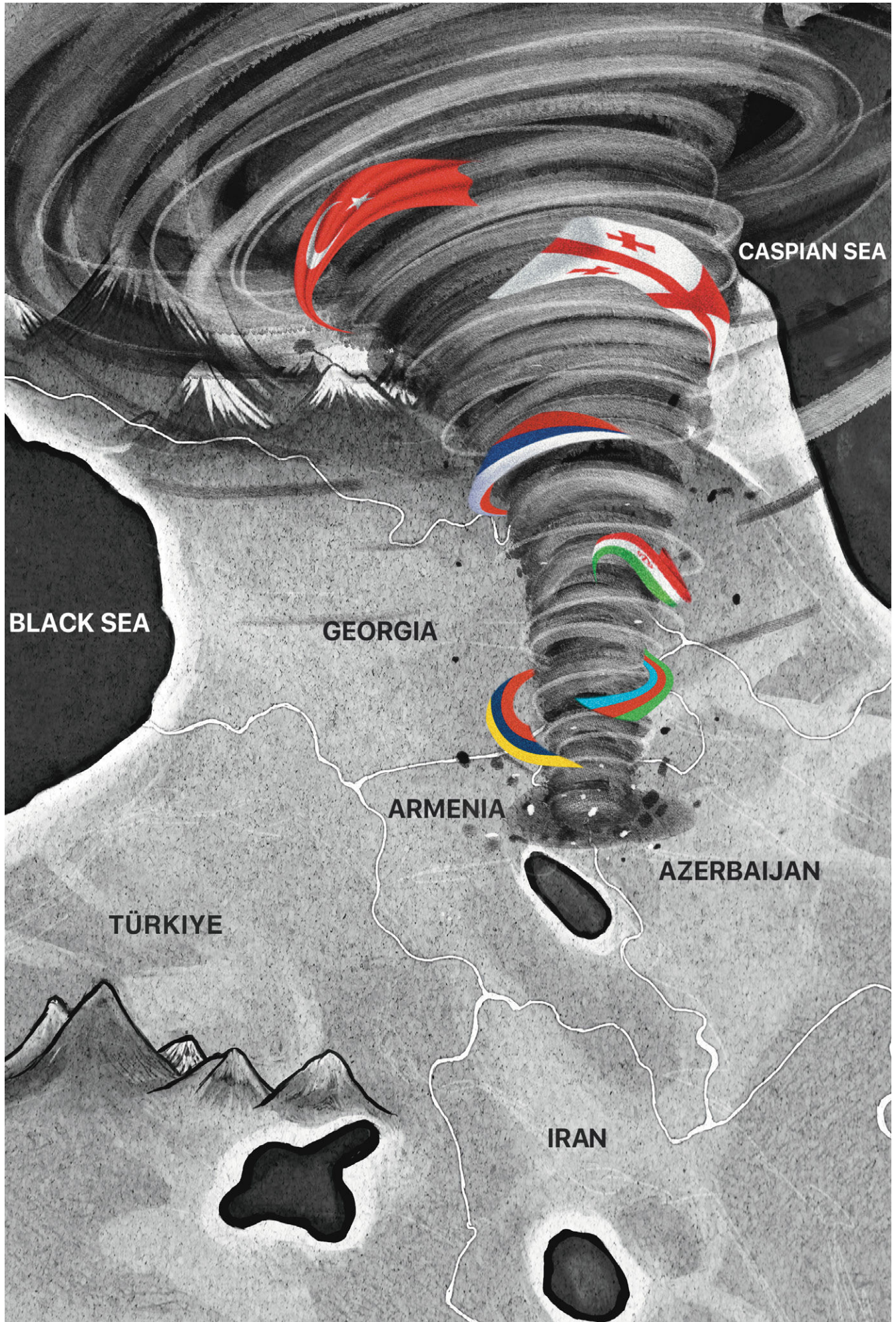
Russia aims to solidify its military and security role in the region, evident in the implementation of the ceasefire agreement and the deployment of peacekeepers.

Russia aims to solidify its military and security role in the region, evident in the implementation of the ceasefire agreement and the deployment of peacekeepers. This has bolstered Moscow's power projection and influence, with troops now stationed in all three South Caucasus states. While its military and diplomatic maneuvering has positioned Russia as a gatekeeper for international initiatives, Türkiye, Iran, and China pose a challenge to Russia, particularly in the economic and transportation sectors.



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Azerbaijan's victory altered the territorial status quo. Baku psychologically overcame past defeats, investing heavily in the recaptured territories and resettling displaced persons. Azerbaijan's close security ties with Türkiye and Israel enhance its regional position with [potential economic benefits](#) from eventually connecting Türkiye to Central Asia and China via its Nakhchivan exclave, Armenia, and the Caspian Sea, thus making it an essential nodal point in China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Middle Corridor.

Georgia is concerned about Russia's military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, prospects of Moscow's increased military and political role in the South Caucasus, and potential isolation if Azerbaijan and Armenia enhance cooperation. Post-war challenges for Georgia primarily revolve around economic issues, especially future transportation routes, domestic political polarization, and fragmentation.

Armenia could “benefit” from the war by pursuing domestic reforms and normalizing relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, strengthening its regional ties and reducing its dependence on Russia, leading to economic development.

Despite losing territory, Armenia could “benefit” from the war by pursuing domestic reforms and normalizing relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, strengthening its regional ties and reducing its dependence on Russia, leading to economic development.

Türkiye's good political relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia and military presence in Azerbaijan strengthened its regional position without directly challenging Moscow's hegemonic place. Ankara's closer economic ties with Baku reflected in the [Shusha Declaration](#) of 15 June 2021, as well as Tür-

kiye's restored military presence in Azerbaijan after more than a century, give it a stronger position when Russia withdraws its peacekeepers from the region. Normalization with Armenia could further enhance Türkiye's regional connectivity by creating land links to Azerbaijan through Nakhchivan and Armenia. This will realize Ankara's long-term goal of gaining access to the Caspian Sea and beyond, bypassing Iran, and becoming a transit hub for this region to Europe. In addition, Türkiye will benefit from the reconstruction of the liberated territories of Azerbaijan and the success of Turkish-made drones and other military systems used in the war against Russian-armed Armenia.

The Geopolitical Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has significantly altered the already complex geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus with potential long-term implications. While the full consequences are still unclear, the Russian aggression, seen as a reaction to Ukraine's desire to decide its future, has raised serious security concerns for the South Caucasus states, [resonating with their desires](#) for independence, strategic autonomy, and security.

The war poses various risks for the South Caucasus, including increased refugee flows, Russian immigration, and potential escalation in the Armenia-Azerbaijan border areas due to shifting international attention, allowing the latter to challenge the status quo. Regardless of its outcome for Russia, the aftermath of the war in Ukraine could result in a more embittered, isolated, and potentially vengeful Russia.

The perception of Russia as an influential and trustworthy partner is weakening.

All three South Caucasus countries have sought ties (albeit of a different degree) with Europe and the US while avoiding negative attention from Russia. Despite the changes, the South Caucasus states are trying to maintain pragmatic relations with Moscow, recognizing Russia's continued importance in the region, albeit in a different role than before. However, the perception of Russia as an influential and trustworthy partner is weakening.

Türkiye has maintained a [delicate balance between Ukraine and Russia](#), sending armaments to Ukraine while refraining from joining Western sanctions against Russia. However, Türkiye's role in the region could increase as a counterbalance to Russia, a gateway to the West, and a key transportation corridor. This possible greater role would be strengthened with the success of the normalization process between Türkiye and Armenia, which could, in turn, open the region, reduce conflict behavior, and mitigate the consequences of Russian spoiler power using regional conflicts as leverage.

Establishing new transport routes is vital from Türkiye's point of view and stabilizing the South Caucasus is critical for this purpose.

A crucial step in this regard is normalizing Türkiye's relations with Armenia. Establishing new transport routes is vital from Türkiye's point of view and stabilizing the South Caucasus is critical for this purpose. Türkiye has long seen the opportunity to develop into an energy center and a [logistics and manufacturing hub](#), in general, benefiting from the country's geographical location between Asia and Europe. The realization of the corridor between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan and the subsequent connection of Türkiye with Azerbaijan via Nakhchivan and Armenia will connect Türkiye with the Caspian Sea and Central Asia beyond.

As demand increases and the Middle Corridor emerges as an alternative route to bypass Russia, the underprepared regional infrastructure needs to be updated to meet potential transportation needs. To address this growing concern, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye recently [signed](#) a declaration to improve transportation routes in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia as an alternative to the northern route via Russia.

The Caspian region is becoming increasingly [important for energy supply](#), and the South Caucasus is a transportation corridor for the EU and Europe, particularly as countries seek to bypass Russia. However, developments in the security situation in the Black Sea, particularly Russian actions around Crimea and eastern Ukraine, concern the coastal states. The Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 and its following military build-up in the region led to a loss of maritime superiority of Türkiye in the Black Sea by the middle of the decade. Russia's attempts to cut Ukraine's access to the Black Sea by taking control of regions like Mariupol and later reports about the floating mines in the western Black Sea were alarming news regarding regional dynamics and Turkish interests. Nevertheless, recent reports that Ukraine has so far been able to [decapacitate a third of Russia's Black Sea Fleet](#) indicate a weakening of Russia's maritime supremacy in favor of Türkiye.

For Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, the Russian invasion of Ukraine presents new security risks, especially following the Second Karabakh War. In addition to the possibility of escalation of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian propaganda could further destabilize Georgia. Moreover, if Ukraine's borders were to change because of the war, this could have a severe impact on the countries in the South Caucasus due to the precedent set. Moreover, Russia uses its regional networks to circumvent sanctions, [creating tension](#) for regional countries with the US and EU.

There is a possibility of further division among South Caucasian countries, with some aligning with Russia to avoid aggression and maintain strategic autonomy. In contrast, others may seek unity against a common threat. However, recent developments, such as direct peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan without Russian involvement, supported by the EU, offer a glimpse of a more favorable scenario for regional cooperation.

Changing the Regional Balance of Power

There is a clear awareness of change in the regional balance of power between Russia and Türkiye and the region's relations with external powers such as the EU and the US. However, the outcome is still in flux. For now, the South Caucasus countries seem to benefit from attention being focused on another arena, but this can change quickly. Therefore, increasing stability within the region is the best remedy to prevent it from becoming the next target of a proxy war.

The Russian distraction caused by the war in Ukraine is having visible effects on the dynamics of the South Caucasus region. Russian military presence has been reduced in various areas, including Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Armenia, to focus on the conflict in Ukraine. This scaling down and other signs of diminishing Russian influence are reshaping the regional security landscape, creating a vacuum.

Türkiye is currently seen as the most critical regional balancing power against Russia.

Türkiye is currently seen as the most critical regional balancing power against Russia. It is impossible to predict how long the existing standoff between Türkiye and Russia will last as both parties compete for foreign policy influence in the Black Sea, Mediterranean, and Levant regions. While their competing cooperation is delicate, Türkiye is still trying to strike a balance between its Western allies and Russia. However, its interests and policies in the South Caucasus are more aligned with the West than with Russia.

The current lack of Russian focus on the Caucasus enables Türkiye to advance in normalizing its relations with Armenia, potentially enhancing its standing in the region. If Türkiye swiftly progresses in this endeavor and manages to overcome its hesitations about displeasing Azerbaijan, it could pose a challenge to Russian influence in the area. However, achieving this would necessitate Türkiye to [revise](#) its policy towards Russia. Whether Türkiye intends to pursue this course of action remains uncertain.

Many “power struggles” in the South Caucasus have developed simultaneously. For Türkiye, the South Caucasus is one of many geographical areas where the boundaries of cooperation and competition dynamics in relations with Russia are constantly being tested. How Türkiye will move in the region will depend on Russia's strength after the war in Ukraine and Türkiye's strategic priorities ■

The 2024 Municipal Elections: Shifting Geopolitical Landscape in Türkiye

The 2024 municipal elections mark the beginning of an end of the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) uncontested rule of the country, significantly reshaping Türkiye's geopolitical landscape. The election results cast doubt on President Erdoğan's political invincibility and his ability to 'turn the electoral tide' in his favor, given the formidable challenges that he faces. Although Erdoğan is expected to remain in power until the upcoming presidential elections in 2028, this notable electoral setback has left him politically vulnerable on both domestic and international fronts. President Erdoğan elevated the importance of regaining control of Istanbul to a matter of personal prestige. Although his name did not appear on the ballot, he invested his personal political capital in seeking to defeat the charismatic opposition candidate, Ekrem Imamoglu, only to suffer a resounding rejection at the polls.

While local elections typically carry less significance than national ones, Türkiye's 2024 local elections [transcended domestic dynamics](#), marking the onset of a new political era in the country. In a departure from past trends, the ruling AKP experienced a significant decline in popular support in Türkiye's 2024 local elections, [losing](#) its long-standing dominance since its rise to power in 2002. This shift in power dynamics saw the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), achieve a victory unprecedented in decades. The CHP not only prevailed in its traditional strongholds in urban centers and major cities but also attained its most remarkable [nationwide electoral success since 1977](#). Additionally, the growing popularity of a conservative Islamist party, New Welfare (YR), has contributed to the fragmentation of the electoral base of the ruling AKP party, marking a significant shift in the country's political landscape. These considerable changes in Türki-



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ye's electoral landscape not only alter Erdoğan's domestic political calculations but also impact his foreign policy options.

How will President Erdoğan, a veteran political survivor, respond to this shifting political landscape? How will his efforts to regain nationwide political support influence Türkiye's foreign policy? And what lessons should Georgia's political stakeholders learn from the country's local elections? These are all important questions that are highly relevant for further analysis.

Erdoğan's Foreign Policy Identity

A sound starting point for this discussion is to review the key characteristics of Erdoğan's foreign policy. Specifically, we need to look at two major trends that define his strategic approach – a gradual departure from the West and the skillful utilization of foreign policy as a tool to deflect attention from domestic challenges.

Since the AKP gained power in late 2002, its foreign policy has been anchored in what Erdoğan's former associate, Ahmed Davutoglu, [labels](#) a “strategic depth.” This notion asserts that Türkiye, as a major regional power, has overlooked its historical ties with neighboring regions at the expense of its partnership with the West. Hence, to reclaim its historical influence, Türkiye's political elites should not view [“their country as an appendage to a larger European whole”](#) but rather as a regional center of gravity – namely, an independent regional great power that extends its influence across the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia without solely positioning itself as a western power.

Like other middle powers, Ankara chooses to avoid strategic dependency on a single power pole by navigating through the conflicting interests of Washington, Beijing, and Moscow.

The clear manifestation of this political outlook is Türkiye's foreign policy balancing act – characterized as Ankara's strategy of hedging. Like other middle powers, Ankara chooses to avoid strategic dependency on a single power pole by navigating through the conflicting interests of Washington, Beijing, and Moscow. Erdoğan's Türkiye has been [acting](#) “like a non-aligned country in its foreign policy as a hedging middle power and pivotal state refusing to put all its eggs in the NATO basket.” This strategic approach, alongside positioning Türkiye as an independent actor in the context of great power competition, also aims to define its new geopolitical identity. In essence, under Erdoğan's leadership, Türkiye has [emerged as a post-Western power](#), steadily distancing itself from the Kemalist foreign policy tradition and gradually lessening its dependency on the West. Yet, this strategic shift should not be interpreted as Ankara's attempt to switch camps or alliances. Instead, Erdoğan [aims](#) to maintain a presence in opposing camps and leverage Türkiye's multifaceted identity to broaden its influence across the region.

The rise of a new class of Anatolian elites has gradually overturned the decades-long tradition of secular, pro-Western policies rooted in Kemalist ideology.

Alongside geopolitical factors, Erdoğan's foreign policy choices are also influenced by the conservative, religious values of his electoral base, particularly in Türkiye's hinterland – Anatolia. As [noted](#) by Soner Cagaptay, the renowned expert on Türkiye, “its (Erdoğan's) foreign policy represents the political and cultural sensitivities of Anatolians far removed from the secularist ethos of the elites who founded the country.” The rise of a new class of Anatolian elites has gradually overturned the decades-long tradition of secular, pro-Western policies rooted in Kemalist ideology. Unlike the more secular urban segments of society, the emerging Anatolian

elites do not [identify](#) themselves as Europeans, thus further distancing Türkiye's new geopolitical identity from the Western world. For populist leaders such as Erdoğan, this provides a conducive environment to leverage foreign policy by cultivating anti-Western sentiments for domestic political gains.

The most notable example of leveraging foreign policy for domestic political benefits was during the 2023 presidential elections where Erdoğan, as [remarked](#) by many observers, pursued one of the most anti-Western and anti-American campaigns ever. The anti-Western rhetoric is widely popular in Türkiye as it resonates not only within Erdoğan's power base but also with a broader segment of the population. However, for Erdoğan, playing the anti-Western card serves a distinct purpose. It allows Türkiye's long-serving leader to divert public attention from domestic challenges for which the Turkish President lacks viable solutions towards a common foreign enemy.

For a populist leader like Erdoğan, “foreign policy, beyond its traditional functions, [serves](#) as an important tool for self-preservation and self-aggrandizement.” Until the latest elections, his strategy of using foreign policy for domestic purposes had been effective. He succeeded in attributing the parlous state of the economy to external factors, primarily Western powers. By skillfully playing the ‘identity card,’ he effectively tapped into the conservative sentiments of Türkiye's public. Furthermore, he used foreign policy to evoke nationalist sentiments, thereby presenting considerable challenges for the opposition to respond effectively. Yet, the factors contributing to Erdoğan's victory in the highly contested 2023 presidential race did not translate into electoral success during the 2024 municipal elections. Whether due to the nature of municipal elections or the efforts of opposition leaders, he could not successfully shift the focus away from economic issues to concentrate solely on external factors or ‘identity’ politics.

Therefore, Erdoğan's failure to effectively deploy the well-tested 'identity card' played a significant role in shaping the outcomes of the 2024 elections.

2024 Municipal Elections: Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

While the main reason for Erdoğan's failure to gain a desirable electoral outcome lies in the poor state of Türkiye's economy, there are additional factors that played a role in his electoral defeat. In particular, we note the unexpected electoral success of the conservative Islamist party, New Welfare (YR), led by Fatih Erbakan, son of Necmettin Erbakan, Erdoğan's former political mentor and a founder of the Islamist movement in contemporary Türkiye. Fatih Erbakan's decision to refrain from forming a coalition with Erdoğan, combined with his highly effective campaign, fractured the AKP's electoral base.

Ironically, the YR party leader employed the same strategies against Erdoğan as he had used against the opposition in previous elections. Fatih Erbakan leveraged foreign policy to undermine Erdoğan's standing, namely by alleging close collaboration between Türkiye and Israel, citing the growth in trade between the two nations. Additionally, he accused President Erdoğan of yielding to Western pressure and endorsing Sweden's NATO membership. In his election night speech, he particularly [emphasized](#) the continuation of trade with Israel and endorsement of Sweden's NATO membership as disgraceful actions by Türkiye's leadership. In a mirror image of Erdoğan's tactics, the YR leader succeeded in tapping into nationalist and religious sentiments within society to vilify his opponents by associating them with the interests of foreign powers.

The fragmentation of the conservative and Islamist electoral base presents a fresh challenge for President Erdoğan. While he will not face another election cycle in the immediate years ahead,

he must still address this challenge to strengthen his hold on power. The municipal election results considerably eroded his position and constrained his maneuverability. After the 2023 presidential elections, Türkiye was expected to improve its strained relationship with the United States and Europe. Given that Erdoğan did not face significant domestic challenges in the aftermath of the presidential elections, there were no incentives for him to antagonize the West further. As Soner Cagaptay explained, following his victory in the 2023 presidential elections, Erdoğan has [embarked](#) on the legacy-building phase of his career, which requires close collaboration with the West, creating momentum for improving strained ties.

Erdoğan has embarked on the legacy-building phase of his career, which requires close collaboration with the West, creating momentum for improving strained ties.

The outcomes of the 2024 municipal elections, however, alter this calculus. The consolidation of a fractured electoral base, particularly given the growing popularity of a new anti-Western, Islamist political party, may change these political dynamics. Given these circumstances, Erdoğan's ability to maneuver is curtailed. His attempts to mend fences and repair strained ties with the United States and Europe will affect his ability to regain control over his fractured electoral base. It is clear that other populist leaders, such as Fatih Erbakan, who have shown the ability to fragment AKP's electoral base, will exploit this to undermine Erdoğan's political brand. Given these circumstances, it seems that President Erdoğan's more feasible option is to persist with his well-tested strategy of leveraging anti-Western sentiments that have helped him to maintain his grip on power for years. Consequently, the prospects of improving Türkiye's relations with the West seem to be the primary casualty of Türkiye's 2024 municipal elections.

The Georgian Perspective

For Georgia, the landmark 2024 elections in Türkiye have two major implications. On the one hand, a shifting geopolitical landscape in Georgia's only NATO neighbor presents challenges for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. On the other hand, the opposition's victory in Türkiye's hybrid regime, characterized by an unlevel playing field and the misuse of state resources, offers valuable lessons for Georgia's opposition parties facing similar conditions ahead of the country's decisive 2024 parliamentary elections.

Any indications of a decline in Turkish-NATO or, more broadly, in Turkish-Western relations further exacerbate the overall regional security environment from the Georgian perspective.

In general, Türkiye's balancing act in foreign policy and its gradual departure from its Western identity is being viewed with growing concern by Georgia's pro-Western political circles. The importance of Türkiye for Georgia's security cannot be overstated as it stands not only as a strategic partner and NATO member but also as a physical land bridge to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Hence, any indications of a decline in Turkish-NATO or, more broadly, in Turkish-Western relations further exacerbate the overall regional security environment from the Georgian perspective. Yet, the shift in Türkiye's foreign policy identity also has concrete ramifications on Georgia's domestic politics. President Erdoğan's multi-alignment foreign policy, manifested by his balanced approach towards Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, provides a context for Georgian authorities to justify their own deviation from the Western foreign policy course. While the domestic contexts of these foreign policy shifts vary significantly, they still offer Georgian authorities an opportunity to portray

their gradual departure from the Western course as part of a broader regional trend. This is particularly concerning given that Georgia's current alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy is historically low, significantly [lagging behind other candidate countries](#).

The opposition's victory in Türkiye resonates strongly across the region as the electoral defeats of long-standing political incumbents are rare occasions in this part of the world. Particularly, the defeat of President Erdoğan, renowned for his electoral invincibility and global political influence, stands out as a significant event that transcends the domestic dimension. These events inspire optimism and positive expectations among opposition forces throughout the region. Within the Georgian context, alongside inspiring optimism, these elections also offer practical insights for opposition parties ahead of the country's decisive 2024 parliamentary elections. Notably, they show how opposition forces can prevent a ruling party from diverting focus from pressing economic issues that concern citizens to 'identity politics' that instill fear in religiously conservative societies. In parallel, opposition leaders can see how to counter a ruling party's efforts to shift blame for domestic issues onto external factors by demonizing long-standing international allies.

Despite the differing socio-political contexts in Türkiye and Georgia, these lessons are important for the Georgian opposition to consider, given that autocratic leaders in the region tend to employ a similar 'playbook' to maintain their grip on power. Within this context, the municipal elections extend beyond the borders of Türkiye and acquire a regional dimension. The electoral setback experienced by the region's foremost political leader, President Erdoğan, not only reshapes the domestic political landscape of Türkiye but also inspires hope for those opposition forces across the region who are fighting entrenched political systems on a distinctly uneven playing field ■

Autumn of the Sovereignist Patriarchs?

The annual *Nations in Transit* [report](#) by Freedom House, a watchdog, is a sobering read. In the context of re-emerging warfare, it paints a region stretching from Eastern Europe to Central Asia that is “being reordered by autocracy and democracy” and where “the countries caught between the two orders are coming to terms with the fact that there is no third option.”

Regimes that previously vacillated between democracy and autocracy—out of conviction or perceived expedience—are having a particularly hard time keeping their balancing act going.

I [wrote](#) back in 2016 that the “grey area” between consolidated democracies and autocratic Russia was particularly fertile ground for the oligarchs. They have learned to play by hybrid rules: knowing the Kremlin’s game, learning to show the democratic façade, and profiting from both. Figures like Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia or Vladimir Plahot-

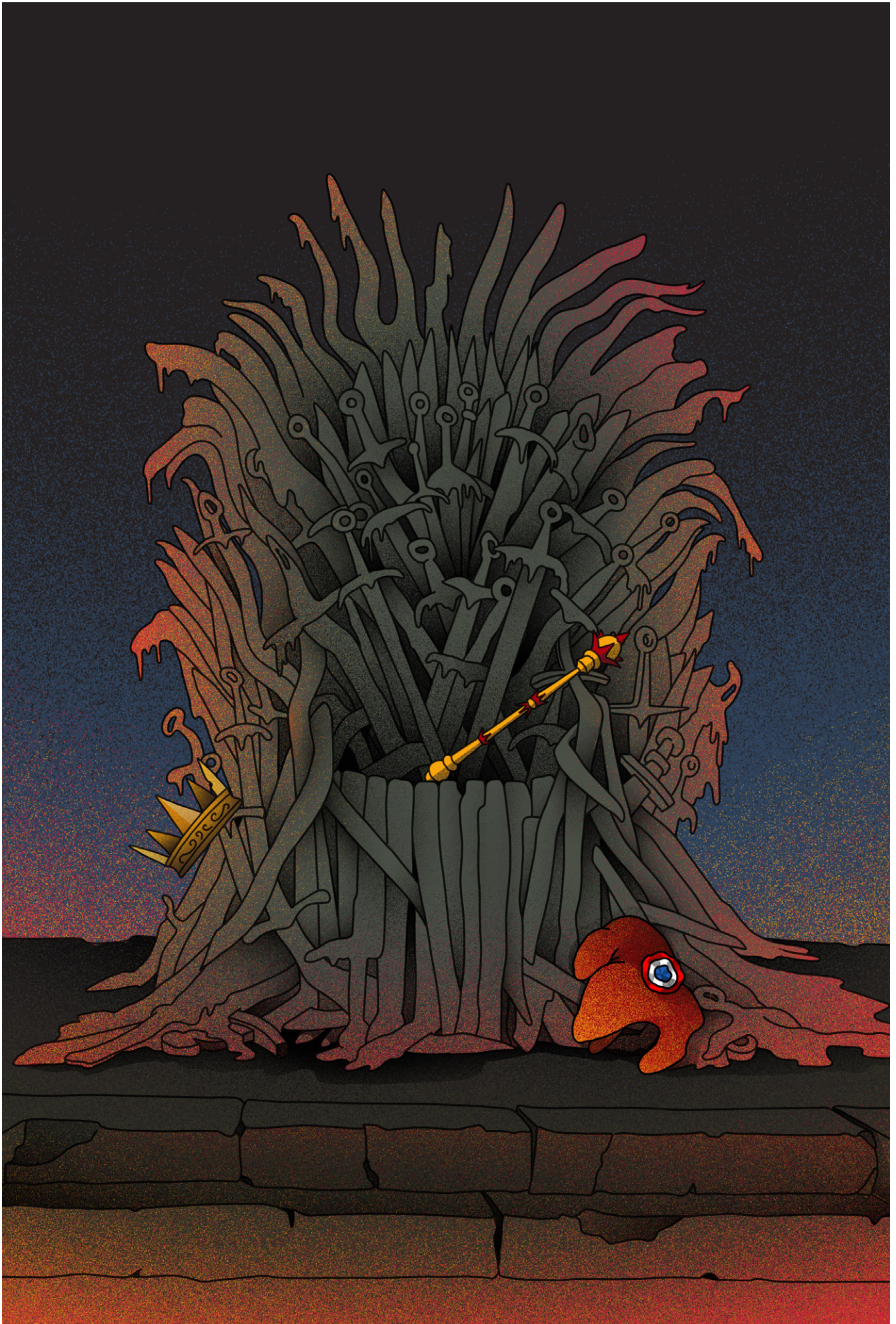
niuc in Moldova embodied such leaders. Those “happy days” are now gone. Some, like Plahotniuc, stumbled on the scale of corruption and were overthrown through elections. Others also find it difficult to cling to, despite the temporary financial windfall profits the Western sanctions on Russia have created (even short of outright sanction-busting).

The *Nations in Transit* also found that to keep hold of power, most hybrid regimes have been growing more authoritarian in the past few years. That shift has been anchored in a somewhat eclectic political ideology that mixes the elements of reactionary conservatism, religious fundamentalism, and cultural nativism. It mixes those with a corrosive dollop of xenophobia and homophobia, stirring it up with conspiracy theories and fearmongering. This toxic mixture entices citizens to reject the universal applicability of liberal norms—human rights, freedom of speech, and assembly—as an external ploy to weaken their nation.



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These “sovereign democracies” – Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Türkiye, and, increasingly, Georgia – with all their differences, quirks, and particularities, are sought-after travel companions for the Kremlin in its crusade against liberal Europe. What is worse, such ideology is resonating in Western Europe through a plethora of primarily ultra-right, anti-establishment parties. Viktor Orbán, Hungary's strongman and one of the chief ideologues of the movement, promises to “occupy Brussels” in the upcoming 2024 European elections.

But recently, something has gone awry in the affairs of the autocratic leaders whose political longevity and economic prosperity seemed immutable.

Little Fires Everywhere

On 1 April 2024, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development (AK) party [was dealt](#) a severe blow by its chief rival, the Republican People's Party (CHP), which swept local elections in big cities, including Istanbul. Even though the nationwide, overall score gave the opposition only a minimal margin, Erdoğan himself was forced to admit the event represented a “turning point” – a far cry from the bluster of 2019 when he called Istanbul election administration officials who gave victory to his party's rival “idiots” and proceeded to crack down on opposition.

Erdoğan's political ideology has never been liberal, but it took a particularly sinister turn after the failed 2016 coup, to which the AK responded with [a monumental crackdown](#) on all sorts of domestic opponents by arresting tens of thousands and purging hundreds of thousands from all walks of life, especially civil service. Despite, or thanks to, those strong-arm methods, the AK has consolidated power and, until recently, seemed unassailable. This allowed Erdoğan to become a regional power player with no firm attachments, juggling his country's traditional alliance with the US and its membership in NATO, arms supply deals with the Kremlin, readiness to accept a massive wave of Syrian refugees, assertive and even aggressive stance towards the European powers in the Aegean Sea, supply of deadly UAVs to Ukraine, and backdoor oil deals with Russia's oil companies.

Yet, despite the attractiveness of such strongman politics in Türkiye and the rediscovery of Ankara's traditional identity as a medium but critical power at the junction of the Occident and the Orient, the AK's overall policies seem to have disappointed many Turks.

The sovereignist regimes live and die on the promise of predictability and stability.

The sovereignist regimes live and die on the promise of predictability and stability. Still, the unending economic troubles and the government's much-criticized response to the 2023 earthquake have dented that premise. With the widening discussion about corruption and nepotism in AK ranks, the popularity of the democracy-minded opposition has also grown, especially under the new leadership. Some local analysts [even say](#) Erdoğan may respond to a crisis by scrapping the all-powerful executive presidency, fearful that it will fall into the hands of the opposition and bring back the parliamentary system.

Another patriarch of “sovereign democracy,” Viktor Orbán, also unexpectedly found himself in hot political water. Orbán’s Fidesz has been riding the wave of [winning](#) the fourth consecutive parliamentary term in 2022. More than once, it willingly set itself on a collision course with Brussels, effectively using the veto on aid to Ukraine to wrestle out financial aid despite stifling democratic institutions and the rule of law. With the political system, courts, and the media rigged to favor Fidesz, Orbán’s position also seemed rock-solid.

Yet, his highly socially conservative movement, which was purporting to protect children from the corrupting influence of “gay propaganda” and “gender politics,” blew up on a fast-burning [child abuse scandal](#) which led to the resignations of Hungary’s President and Justice Minister, both high-ranking Fidesz politicians.

As Orbán failed to contain the crisis, Péter Magyar, once an insider in the Fidesz party, emerged as a consolidating opposition figure. Tens of thousands of Hungarians—including from Fidesz’s traditional conservative electoral base—took to the streets demanding a change of government.

Add to this trend the [political defenestration](#) of Poland’s Law and Justice (PiS) party in the late 2023 elections by their longtime liberal rivals, and the outlook for Europe’s most established conservative and anti-liberal political forces suddenly looks less bright than often assumed. What is happening?

Choosing Your Camp

As the Freedom House report justly points out, in Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, democratic regimes have coexisted with increasingly autocratic ones, leaving a range of grey areas: consolidating democracies and hybrid regimes. In Europe, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine pro-

jected a stark geopolitical shadow: there can be no middle ground between aggressive Russia and Europe.

In Europe, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine projected a stark geopolitical shadow: there can be no middle ground between aggressive Russia and Europe.

Before the war, the European Union plunged into the lethargy of “enlargement fatigue,” but after Russia invaded Ukraine, it opened its doors to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Implementing European governance standards was an obvious precondition for negotiations and eventual accession.

Orbán’s [antics](#) on Ukraine have exasperated the Western capitals. As a ranking member of the German Parliament [remarked](#) recently, “the prospect of another Orbán-like regime will lower the chances of [...] joining the European Union down to zero.”

On its side, Russia is on a war footing, and more than ever, the thuggish inhabitants of the Kremlin demand and value unquestioned loyalty above all. The demise of the top warlord, Evgeni Prigozhin, showed that even Putin’s personal, valuable cronies could not play the “Tsar is Good, but the Boryars are Bad” card to gain more influence.

These days, Russia demands undiluted loyalty in the form of legislative [shibboleths](#), such as the “foreign agent laws,” be it in [Kyrgyzstan](#), [Kazakhstan](#), [Republika Srpska](#), or Georgia, which work to bring the repressive powers of the overbearing state into sync with Russia’s repressive laws.

So, what lessons are from Türkiye, Hungary, and Poland? Which way are things going?

People tire of authoritarian populists, too.

First lesson: People tire of authoritarian populists, too. Their speeches lose luster, their promises ring hollow, and once the economy hits the doldrums or abuses of power become too apparent and outrageous, voters seek new champions.

The regimes that have stacked all the cards against the opposition are vulnerable if they are left standing in the real vestiges of electoral democracy.

Second, even the regimes that have stacked all the cards against the opposition are vulnerable if they are left standing in the real vestiges of electoral democracy. You may designate the opposition and quash it through repression (like in Türkiye), ruse (like in Hungary), or legislative capture of the key institutions (like in Poland or Moldova), but the old forces can re-consolidate (like in Moldova, Poland, and Türkiye), and the new ones may emerge, often from inside the regime (like in Hungary).

So far, it is promising for the partisans of the liberal worldview and democracy. But not so fast.

Institutional capture and the dominance of security institutions leave ample space for autocratic leaders to quell and turn the tide of opposition.

Thirdly, institutional capture and the dominance of security institutions leave ample space for autocratic leaders to quell and turn the tide of opposition. Adam Bodnar, the Polish justice minister tasked with restoring the independence of the judiciary, [said recently](#) that the task is “colossal,” and once captured, these institutions are hellishly difficult to revert to normal while staying within the confines of the Constitutional order. Similarly, Moldova finds it hard to shed the vestiges of state capture, especially in the justice sector, left over by the oligarchic rule. The challenge seems daunting for Hungary as well, where Fidesz has been gnaw-

ing at the institutional foundations of democracy longer, or Türkiye and Georgia, where they have not been fully consolidated to begin with.

Being under the Western/NATO security umbrella makes it easier – if not inevitable – to make a pro-democratic choice.

Fourth, security plays a significant role: being under the Western/NATO security umbrella makes it easier – if not inevitable – to make a pro-democratic choice. Being left outside such an umbrella exposes one to the whims and wrath of unchained authoritarian powers, making choices ever starker. This augurs ill for Ukraine and Georgia. Also, obviously, the larger the country is – in terms of its territorial and population, but mostly its geopolitical weight – the larger its freedom of maneuver and range of choices.

Fifth, in-country choices are closely tied to regional and international trends. Citizens are not passive actors but perceive the stark choices before them. A choice towards autocracy is often a choice for stability and based on the fear of a catastrophe, such as war, civil strife, and economic collapse, whether conscious or unconscious, real or manipulated.

A resounding success of Western support for Ukraine will convince many that liberal democracies are indeed capable of self-defense and are less of a risky proposition than the leaders led them to believe.

A resounding success of Western support for Ukraine will convince many that liberal democracies are indeed capable of self-defense and are less of a risky proposition than the leaders led them to believe. The longer the current penury of Western aid leaves Ukraine defenseless against the Russian

onslaught, the weightier the Russian menace and the more tempting it is to submit to its diktat.

Finally, although the *Nations in Transit* report shows that the established Western European democracies have been consolidating, we face years of crucial elections. The success of the sovereignist, anti-liberal political forces in the US, France, and Germany will put in the sails of their eastern and southern precursors. And even if one populist strongman stumbles, another will take his place.

Time for Stark Choices

War in Europe is a harbinger of ideological polarization both within the countries and between the emerging camps. As the grey zones shrink, citizens face stark choices. Their ability to make those choices is not equal in every country. While Western Europeans will choose their leaders freely, in

Europe's east and southern neighborhoods, they would first have to counter the gravity field created by anti-liberal forces and autocratic regional powers.

Recent developments show that democracy retains its rallying force of attraction even in places where populist sovereignism has captured politics – and state institutions – for decades. Citizens band together, sometimes across the political divide, to make their voices heard and to restore a functioning democratic institution. People in Ukraine make advances in their democratic institutions, even as they wage an existential war against revisionist Russia.

In 2024, Europeans who live in democracies will make a choice: either to stand in solidarity with their brave neighbors and thus expand the field of attraction of the freedom-loving pole or to go into a fatal lockdown against the rising tide of authoritarianism. Nothing is decided yet ■

Georgia's U-Turn and Yanukovich Moment

In December 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. What happened next is well-known - Ukrainians stood up for their European future and changed the pro-Russian government. On April 29, 2024, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the informal ruler of Georgia and an honorary chairman of the Georgian Dream, effectively [declared](#) that the country was no longer on the path to joining the EU. Georgians have also responded to this with massive protests. However, the outcome of this resistance to change in foreign policy is yet to be seen.

Mr. Ivanishvili's seminal "U-turn speech" underscored the importance of Georgia's sovereignty and independence in the face of Western interference.

Mr. Ivanishvili's seminal "U-turn speech" underscored the importance of Georgia's sovereignty and independence in the face of Western interfer-

ence. He narrated his version of Georgia's recent history, blaming Western powers for dragging Georgia and Ukraine into the wars with Russia and vilifying NGOs, the EU, and the US for running the puppet regime in Georgia before 2012.

In the days after his speech, the Georgian Dream leadership engaged in unprecedented verbal attacks against the European and American allies, blaming them for attempting to stage a coup d'état twice from 2020 to 2023.

Mr. Ivanishvili made it clear he intended to silence the NGOs and free media and threatened to politically and legally persecute "collective UNM," which in Georgian Dream's lingua means all opposition parties, critical media, NGOs, and activist groups. According to Ivanishvili, there is a "global war party," a scarecrow chimera, which plans to drag Georgia into the war with Russia and plans a coup



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against the Government through its proxy NGOs and political forces. These NGOs are pseudo-elite, nurtured by foreign powers, who have no homeland, who do not love their country or people, and, on the contrary, are embarrassed by them. In the days after his speech, the Georgian Dream leadership engaged in unprecedented verbal attacks against the European and American allies, blaming them for attempting to stage a coup d'état twice from 2020 to 2023.

Georgia's Yanukovich moment is now a reality, and its resolution will determine the country's future for decades.

Russian Laws and Rhetoric

Turnaround of the foreign policy is based on a very concrete legal basis – the draft laws on foreign agents and anti-LGBT propaganda. These laws, straight from the Kremlin handbook of autocratic governance, are usually used to spread disinformation about the West, to rally people around na-

tionalistic, xenophobic sentiments, and to decapitate civil society and free media.

The Georgian Dream [introduced](#) the anti-LGBT propaganda constitutional package on March 23, 2024. The proposed initiative exclusively recognizes marriage as a union between a genetically male and a genetically female individual at least 18 years old. Adoption or fostering of minors is to be restricted to spouses married according to Georgian laws or by heterosexual individuals. Medical interventions related to gender reassignment are forbidden, and official documents must reflect only the individual's genetic sex. Any decision limiting gender-specific terms is void, and gatherings, distribution of materials, and educational content promoting same-sex relationships, incest, adoption by same-sex couples, gender reassignment, or non-binary terminology are prohibited. In the public discussions of the constitutional changes, the Georgian Dream leaders often criticized the West for imposing gay propaganda on Georgia, arguing that the Georgian public needed to resist this pressure.

On April 3, 2024, the Georgian Dream reintroduced the “Transparency of Foreign Influence” law, which civil society and the international community justly dubbed Russian law. On April 17 and May 1, 2024, the law was adopted with [first](#) and [second](#) hearings despite unprecedented local and international pushback. In March 2023, a similar law was [retracted](#) after tens of thousands of angry Georgians, mainly the younger generation, hit the streets, and the Government tried to disperse them in vain with tear gas and water cannons.

In 2023, the photos of brave Georgian Gen-Z-ers waving European and Georgian flags, resisting the Government’s efforts to silence them, circled the world news agencies. When the law was withdrawn in March 2023, jubilation ensued, comparable to the sense of joy that Georgians felt for two weeks since March 26, 2024, when the Georgian National Football Team qualified for the European Football Championship, until the foreign agents’ law was reintroduced again. This time, the name of the law changed from “foreign agents” to “the transparency of foreign influence,” but the essence and content remained the same as in 2023, very close to what Putin passed in 2012.

The main similarity between the Georgian and Russian laws is that both oblige the NGOs and media, who receive funding from abroad, to label themselves as servants of foreign interests or face impossible fines.

The main similarity between the Georgian and Russian laws is that both oblige the NGOs and media, who receive funding from abroad, to label themselves as servants of foreign interests or face impossible fines. No other Western country has a law that qualifies any organization as the carrier of foreign interest or foreign agent only because of the financing. Another striking similarity is that, just like in Russia, and unlike the US, Israel, or Aus-

tralia, the primary entities against which the law is directed are the European and American funds, donors, and assistance programs. As one opposition MP proposed during the Parliament session, - „specify that the foreign power is Russia, and everyone would support the law“. However, the ruling party’s rhetoric suggests that the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and European Endowment for Democracy (EED) are real threats, not Russia’s Primakov Center or other Russia-funded foreign influence programs.

In May 2018, the author of this article, when serving in the Parliament, introduced the bill to counter Russian propaganda, which envisaged transparency measures for Russian-funded organizations. The Georgian Dream voted the bill down then, arguing that it was not the time to upset Moscow. The time has come to upset the West and please Moscow.

The decision to reintroduce the “Russian Law” was perhaps not unexpected, especially considering that during the last few months, the Georgian Dream stepped up the rhetoric against the NGOs and foreign donors and even introduced the law on countering LGBT propaganda in the best Russian tradition. But those who were surprised had a solid argument, too. After all, in December 2023, the European Union granted Georgia the EU candidate status, a move seen as more geopolitically motivated than solely based on the assessment of reform progress. However, the clear stance that Georgia does not care for the European integration track was more unexpected. Chairman of the GD party, former prime minister Irakli Gharibashvili, [said](#) that Georgia was not ready for the membership and neither was the EU. Georgian Dream propagandists are now pushing the narrative that Georgians want Europe, and not the European Union.

Direct Breach of the EU Commitments

In December 2023, even though the EU acknowledged that only three of the twelve conditions were fulfilled, it still granted Georgia the candidate status on the understanding that the new nine steps should be implemented. Among these new conditions were the fight against disinformation against the EU, cooperation with civil society, and depolarization.

With Episode 2 of foreign agents' law, the Georgian Dream has fundamentally breached its commitments to the EU, undermining all three of these promises.

This confluence of requirements will effectively cripple the operations of the CSOs and will lead to many organizations shutting down and leaving the country.

If the law is passed, the Georgian civil society organizations will be labeled as serving “foreign interests,” those who refuse to register as such and disclose their financial declarations will face a substantial penalty of 8000 euros, followed by an additional 3000 euros per month. Moreover, the government will gain the authority to monitor (read - obstruct) the activities of these organizations, including as a result of anonymous reporting. This confluence of requirements will effectively cripple the operations of the CSOs and will lead to many organizations shutting down and leaving the country. This would be especially problematic in the run-up to the October 2024 elections, when the role of the election monitoring organizations, critical media, journalistic investigations, and fact-checkers is vital.

The draft law proposed by the Georgian Dream also runs counter to the condition the EU imposed – to counter disinformation against the EU. The government argues that similar laws exist in the EU, even blatantly lying that the EU requested them to pass such a law.

Furthermore, the Government's rhetoric that the EU is dragging Georgia into the war with Russia is the most blatant and vivid violation of the obligation to counter the disinformation against the EU.

The EU indeed plans to enhance the transparency of the organizations receiving funding from Russia and China. However, it plans to target only the activities representing foreign actors' interests. In contrast, the Georgian Dream's legislation targets all NGOs receiving funding from the EU and the United States. Notably, prominent targets of Georgian Dream's steps include the European Endowment for Democracy, the National Endowment for Democracy, USAID, and other Western donors. This narrative strengthens the government's assertion that the EU is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs. Furthermore, the Government's rhetoric that the EU is dragging Georgia into the war with Russia is the most blatant and vivid violation of the obligation to counter the disinformation against the EU.

Thirdly, this initiative is poised to exacerbate polarization. Last year, a broad spectrum of voices, including political opposition, mass media, NGOs, academics, and even athletes, united in denouncing the proposed law. Students took to the streets, and their resistance was pivotal in prompting the Georgian Dream to retract the legislation. Consequently, the reintroduction of essentially the same law this year, albeit under a different title, is bound to reignite societal divisions.

The EU already said very clearly that the EU commitments are being breached, and if the law is passed, there will be no advancement on the European integration path.

The EU already said very clearly that the EU commitments are being breached, and if the law is passed, there will be no advancement on the European integration path. In the statement issued on April 4, 2024, the EU called on Georgia “to uphold its commitment to the promotion of democracy, the rule of law and human rights” and pointed out that “Step 9 [of EU commitments] includes a recommendation for Georgia to make sure that civil society can operate freely, and Step 1 calls on Georgia to fight disinformation against the EU and its values.” European leaders made it very clear that Georgia’s passing the law would equally derail the European path. As Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi and HRVP Borel stressed in their joint statement, “this law is not in line with EU core norms and values” and would negatively impact Georgia’s progress on its EU path.”

Why Now?

The answer to this question remains speculative. However, the interest in knowing what went backstage between Tbilisi and Moscow is very interesting.

Obviously, one cannot discount Mr Ivanishvili’s personal phobias and paranoia following Bidzina Ivanishvili’s formal re-engagement in party politics as the honorary chair of the Georgian Dream. Suppressing NGOs and media, representing one of the few bastions outside the oligarch’s sphere of influence leading up to the 2024 Parliamentary elections, may offer Mr Ivanishvili a sense of reassurance. Indeed, by cutting off Western funding to these NGOs, he may perceive a reduction in resistance to his rule, thus bolstering his grip on power.

Suppressing NGOs and media, representing one of the few bastions outside the oligarch’s sphere of influence leading up to the 2024 Parliamentary elections, may offer Mr Ivanishvili a sense of reassurance.

There could also be entirely rational justification beyond personal psychological factors, assuming that the ruling party can make decisions based on pragmatic calculations rather than the leader’s whims. The impending polarization, which this law will undoubtedly exacerbate, aligns with the interests of the Georgian Dream as the elections approach. A more polarized electorate increases the likelihood that the ruling party can affix labels such as “global war party,” “UNM supporters,” and “radical opposition” to all opposition factions and NGOs. With the proportional elections approaching, only a polarized society could guarantee the Georgian Dream a win without a coalition partner.

Polarization necessitates a divisive issue. Initially, the Georgian Dream attempted to exploit the topic of “LGBT propaganda” as a polarizing issue, a predictable move in a conservative religious society like Georgia. However, neither LGBT organizations, civil society, nor the opposition took the bait. Consequently, the Georgian Dream reintroduced the foreign agent law, tested and guaranteed to deepen societal polarization.

However, none of these explanations shed light on why the Georgian Dream changed the foreign policy course, effectively disengaging from the European integration path. After all, if the oligarch wanted to make the NGOs and media dysfunctional, he could have done it through other means, either by concocting the cases or by tasking the prosecution and investigative services to drag the opponents into a costly and time-consuming legal battle. If he just wanted to criticize the critical NGOs as foreign spies, that could also have been

done through his potent propaganda machine, which he had been doing for years anyway.

The primary factor appears to be Mr. Ivanishvili's decision to go fully authoritarian, following the examples of Lukashenka and Putin. Fewer people object to fewer problems he will have, stacking the elections in 2024 in his favor. As Comrade Stalin put it – „No Person, No Problem“.

Another big question is whether Moscow played a role in Ivanishvili's decision to reverse Georgia's foreign policy course. For a billionaire who is wary of his personal security and wealth, Moscow is a threat he can not counter with European integration. Neither can he maintain power if he implements the conditions necessary for entering the EU. Independent courts, strong state institutions, a system of checks and balances, and power-sharing are more frightening for Ivanishvili than Russia, which condones the governance style of the Georgian Dream.

Moreover, Russia could have made it clear to Ivanishvili that the European integration of Georgia must stop. We will never know how and through which channels this happened; however, the decision to start attacking the EU Member states' and institutions' leaders, and at the same time trying to pass the laws, which the EU considers against European values, serve precisely that purpose – willingly stopping the European integration path. As the German Foreign minister [said](#), „It is up to the [Georgian] authorities not to deliberately block the way to the future.“

One could argue that forcing the adoption of Russian law would serve the willful purpose of breaking the opponents' resistance and demoralizing the young. They would then sink into depression and either flee the country to the EU or relegate themselves to more passive societal roles. In any case, the Georgian Dream would have a higher chance of maintaining power.

In addition, by the time the law had been reintroduced, the GD leaders believed (and not totally groundlessly) that they had a *carte blanche* from the West. Despite not delivering on the most significant reforms, Georgia was granted EU candidate status, and the government adeptly capitalized on this achievement. While the EU's decision may have been geopolitically motivated, the Georgian Dream interpreted it as an indication that regardless of their actions, they would continue receiving free rides towards the EU accession by bandwagoning Ukraine and exploiting the EU's geopolitical thinking.

Furthermore, to the delight of the Georgian dream leaders, the EU did not commit to evaluating the implementation of the nine new conditions until after the Georgian elections in October 2024. Rumors suggest that even USAID pledged to withdraw its financing from local NGOs, yielding to government pressure. These factors may have encouraged GD leaders to reintroduce all the measures they had sought to implement last year but refrained from doing so to avoid jeopardizing the EU candidate status. Now, they have the candidate status and a feeling of a *carte blanche* from the EU.

What Can the West (Still) Do?

Let's be clear. The West has said almost everything there is to say. The MEPs, European Council President, EU Commission President, Commissioner for Enlargement, HRVP, the ministers of foreign affairs, and the Foreign Relations committee heads of most of the EU states made it clear that if the law is passed, Georgia will be turning its back to the EU. Many EU states summoned Georgian Ambassadors, and even more wrote letters to the Government of Georgia. Americans went even further. The letter of the [fourteen](#) US senators sent chills as Washington threatened to reconsider bilateral relations. State Department has been issuing warnings almost daily since the crisis broke out.

Four things could still be done in terms of statements and high-level pressure. The Western heads of state could intervene through public statements, bilateral calls for action, and visits. The President of Georgia could invite high-level delegations to mediate the crisis. But the EU should not make the same mistake it did in 2021, when Charles Michel mediated the political crisis. Unlike in 2021, now the role of political parties is minimal; the protest is decentralized and even if the Georgian Dream decides to change its mind, it will not be a reliable partner for the Georgian population. What, therefore, needs to be done is to start treating the Georgian government for what it is – a Government that led the country away from the EU.

More importantly, the West must clarify that it will step up supporting civil society in Georgia. Once the NGOs are threatened with shutting down, their bank accounts will close, and many NGOs will start registering outside of Georgia. They will require assistance legally and financially. The mood in Tbilisi is not to give up but to resist and fight the foreign policy u-turn. The West must support it.

Thirdly, the EU must commit to publishing an in-

terim assessment of the implementation status of the nine steps in June and a final evaluation in October, before the Georgian elections. This would send a clear message to the Georgian citizens and the government that the EU will not hesitate to publicly identify and criticize the government should it impede reform progress.

Lastly, should the law proceed despite warnings, the EU must resort to imposing personal sanctions against those who hold Georgian democracy hostage, beginning with the de facto leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and extending to any MPs who endorse discriminatory, anti-European legislation.

Lastly, should the law proceed despite warnings, the EU must resort to imposing personal sanctions against those who hold Georgian democracy hostage, beginning with the de facto leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and extending to any MPs who endorse discriminatory, anti-European legislation. Making this clear at the outset will be the cold shower for the GD's button-pressing majority ■

Georgia's Resilience Against Russian Hybrid Warfare

Amidst the ongoing full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is crucial to evaluate how the war affected Russia's hybrid warfare tactics and its ability to extend influences in other countries of its neighborhood. Assessing the effectiveness of Russia's hybrid warfare boils down to measuring Russia's malign influence by analyzing its ability to shape both government policy and public opinion.

Georgia, as a long-time testbed for Russia's hybrid tactics, is a perfect case study for measuring the effectiveness of Russia's malign efforts. For the past decades, Russia has employed psychological pressure through activities like 'borderization' and supported anti-democratic forces while undermining democratic institutions. Additionally, it blackmailed and undermined Western initiatives critical for Georgia's strategic partnerships like the [Anaklia](#) deep sea project.

Before the war, Georgia's ruling party pretended to uphold a pro-Western stance.

Before the war, Georgia's ruling party pretended to uphold a pro-Western stance. Still, it failed to make substantial progress in reform and democratization agendas, highlighting a significant disparity between rhetoric and action. After the start of the full-scale war, the ruling party in Georgia adopted policies that inadvertently aligned with Russian interests, including aggressive [responses](#) to the [recommendations](#) of Western partners and [alignment](#) with Russian narratives in mainstream political discourse.

The shift from pro-Western to pro-Russian policies clearly indicates the ruling party's susceptibility to the Kremlin's overt and covert pressure on Georgia to align with its interests.



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While Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party failed to maintain a credible pro-Western stance even on the record, its actions indicate a clear shift towards authoritarian rule and attacks on pro-Western positions in Georgia, partly driven by pressure from Russia and partly by the short-term financial and political interests of the ruling elites. The shift from pro-Western to pro-Russian policies clearly indicates the ruling party's susceptibility to the Kremlin's overt and covert pressure on Georgia to align with its interests, leading to a growing divide between policy decisions and public opinion.

Measuring Influences

Russia's hybrid warfare strategy in Georgia encompasses exerting pressure on government policy and public opinion. The ruling party's susceptibility to external influences has resulted in policy shifts that align with Russian interests. At the same time, efforts to manipulate public opinion have fueled division and confusion within Georgian

society. While the ruling party's alignment with Russian interests is evident, the impact on public sentiment [remains](#) a contested battleground, highlighting ongoing challenges in countering Russia's influence within Georgia. Accordingly, studying indicators and analyzing factors and variables that enable Russian influence in Georgia is crucial.

The Georgian Dream's initial [pattern](#) of on-the-record maintaining the pro-Western course but not taking specific actions toward Western institutions to avoid the irritation of the Kremlin has been disabled by Russia's attack on Ukraine. After the war, Russia effectively leveraged pressure on Georgia to prove commitment to the 'normalization' of relations. The Georgian Dream demonstrated its loyalty by not supporting Ukraine, attacking pro-Western positions in Georgia, and, most importantly, facilitating the objectives of Russia's hybrid warfare. Apart from the alignment of Georgia's foreign policy with Russia and attempts to drift away from EU integration, three key indicators can help measure the increase of

Russian influence: an uncontrolled influx of Russians, growing trade and economic dependency on Russia, and the consolidation of Russian-style governance. All three pose a significant challenge to Georgia's national interests, and being closely interconnected reinforces each other's adverse effects.

Uncontrolled Influx of Russians

The influx of Russian migrants following Moscow's declaration of partial mobilization in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine presents a substantial challenge with significant repercussions. Statistical data reveals a notable increase in Russian citizens entering Georgia, with 148,000 arrivals in the third quarter of 2022 and 160,000 in the first three quarters of 2023. Given the magnitude and lack of control over the influx, these numbers directly threaten national security, economic stability, and social cohesion.

Despite government assurances of security control, the continued visa-free entry for Russians and selective denial of entry to Putin's critics raise doubts about the effectiveness of existing measures.

The surge in arrivals, ostensibly as tourists but likely intending long-term stays, strains resources and infrastructure. Despite government assurances of security control, the continued visa-free entry for Russians and selective [denial](#) of entry to Putin's critics raise doubts about the effectiveness of existing measures. Moreover, the composition of the migrant population adds complexity; while some seek refuge from political repression or economic hardship, many are young, educated individuals successfully employed or running businesses. There are apparent concerns about infiltration by Russian intelligence services or hostile elements,

given Russia's remarkable track record of successfully applying various hybrid tactics from espionage to sabotage in Georgia and other countries of the region.

Regarding long-term stays, 62,300 Russian citizens were registered as immigrants in Georgia in 2022 with data for 2023 awaiting release. However, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1,856,000 visitors entered from Russia in 2023, with 1,887,000 leaving. Russian visitors spent USD 938 million in 2023, a 5.3% increase from 2022, although their share of total revenue decreased from 25.3% to 22.8%. These figures illustrate the economic impact and delicate balance between economic interests and national security.

Economically, the migration wave presents a complex picture. While it gives a short-term steroid boost to Georgia's economy through increased spending and investment from Russian migrants, it also exacerbates challenges such as rising rent prices and housing competition. Discriminatory practices against both Georgian citizens and migrants further fuel social [tensions](#) and economic disparities. Politically, the ruling Georgian Dream party views the influx as a financial opportunity but faces criticism for neglecting security concerns.

Civil society and opposition [demand](#) stricter immigration controls due to rising security and dependency concerns. Russia has an extensive track record of using the protection of the rights of ethnic minorities as the pretext for invasion (as in the case of Ukraine), as well as attempts to use minorities as the source of pressure on governments (as in the case of the Baltic States). The inpouring also strains relations between citizens and the government, and with the strong support of the Georgian population for Ukraine and historical distrust of Russia, this creates dangers of raising public unrest, including risks of ethnic tensions.

Economic Dependence on Russia

The massive influx of migrants in Georgia caused significant economic shifts, marking a substantial increase in economic interdependence with Russia and raising concerns about Georgia's long-term resilience. The sectors most significantly impacted include tourism, real estate, and trade.

The jump in demand, fueled by the influx of migrants, facilitated a 155% increase in tourist arrivals and a 209% rise in visitors in the first eight months of 2022 compared to the previous year. In 2022, amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russian visitors surged, reaching 1.1 million, a fivefold increase from 2021. In 2023, visitors increased to 1.4 million, 30% more than in 2022. Despite this, the share of Russians in the total number of visitors [varied](#) around 25% in 2022 and 2023. However, the consistent growth of migrants and visitors increases dependency on Russian money and ties Georgia closer into the Russian economic orbit.

The spike in demand for housing, transportation, and related services, and the subsequently increased inflow of money into affected sectors, boosted economic growth, driving a 10.3% average rate of economic development for the first eight months of 2022. However, it also resulted in an inflation rate of 11.9%, outpacing economic growth. One notable consequence was the significant increase in real estate prices, rising by an average of 10.7% within the first nine months of 2022. Moreover, the prices of movable properties, such as cars, also increased considerably. These trends disproportionately affected the middle class, leading to further impoverishment.

Trade dynamics mirrored Georgia's growing economic dependence on Russia. As stated in the [report](#) by Transparency International, in the first half of 2023, Georgia's trade with Russia increased by 32% compared to the same period in 2022.

Russia's share in Georgia's total trade has risen to 12.4%. The share of the EU in total exports declined from 21.9% in 2019 to 14.9% in 2022, underscoring the shift towards Russia. Georgia's exports to Russia increased by 6.8 % in 2022, with notable increases in the export of cars (fourfold), wine (10%), and other alcoholic beverages (40%). Import of oil products from Russia surged by 352%, driven by low prices and high profit margins. Additionally, importing other products from Russia increased by USD 188 million, maintaining high dependency levels, particularly in wheat imports. Such an evident flourishing of trade and economic relations underlines Georgia's geopolitical choice in favor of Russia amid Western attempts to isolate Russia to minimize its capacity to protract the war in Ukraine.

The surge in Russian businesses registering in Georgia, with 11,552 companies in 2023, raised questions about the country's economic sovereignty.

Furthermore, the surge in Russian businesses registering in Georgia, with 11,552 companies in 2023, raised questions about the country's economic sovereignty. The dominance of sole proprietorships among these businesses, comprising 96% of registrations, indicated long-term residents potentially engaged in business activities, raising concerns about Georgia being used as a conduit to circumvent international sanctions against Russia. Civil society points to the urgent need for comprehensive trade and immigration policies aligned with Georgia's allies, principles of solidarity with Ukraine, its broader democratic development, and European integration goals.

Consolidation of the Russian Style of Governance

Recent attempts by the Georgian government to [re-introduce](#) legislation akin to Russia's "foreign agent" law signify a worrisome trend in the country's democratic development and European integration efforts. The bill, initially introduced in March 2023 and then retracted because of mass protests, was tabled again and voted on in April 2024, demonstrating the ruling Georgian Dream party's willingness to tighten its grip on power at the expense of democratic principles and commitments towards the EU. By requiring civil society organizations, which receive more than 20% of funding from abroad, to register as "organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power," the law effectively targets NGOs and media critical of the government. Thus, the law mirrors Russia's authoritarian governance style and risks deepening Russian influence in Georgia.

Critics rightfully liken the proposed law to measures used by Putin's regime to silence dissent and control civil society, highlighting the dangers it poses to Georgia's democratic fabric.

The parallels between the Georgian legislation and Russia's draconian laws are stark. Critics rightfully liken the proposed law to measures used by Putin's regime to silence dissent and control civil society, highlighting the dangers it poses to Georgia's democratic fabric. The timing of the bill's reintroduction, just before parliamentary elections, suggests a calculated move by the Georgian Dream to suppress opposition voices and maintain its monopoly on all sources of power.

By framing the legislation as a means to counter foreign influence, the government seeks to discredit its opponents as puppets of foreign pow-

ers, thus undermining the credibility of dissenting voices and consolidating its authority. Government propaganda also tries to brand the law as a necessary step for increasing transparency of financing, which aligns with practices in some Western democratic countries. In blunt contrast with Western legislation of a similar nature, instead of regulating lobbyist activities or countering hybrid tactics by hostile actors, this law echoes Russian ways of stifling opposition and undermining independent civil society and media by labeling them as foreign agents.

The refusal to investigate highly publicized corruption [accusations](#) against public figures linked to the Georgian Dream underscores the lack of the government's genuine desire for transparency. Furthermore, there is a synchronized [defense](#) of sanctioned former officials and sitting judges by all branches of power in Georgia against [allegations](#) of extending Russian influence and engaging in corruption. The reluctance of Georgian authorities to acknowledge and address these allegations, coupled with attempts to deflect blame onto external forces, indicates a systemic failure to uphold democratic values and the rule of law.

The reintroduction of legislation resembling Russia's foreign agent law poses significant threats to Georgia's democratic aspirations.

The European Union and the United States have [expressed](#) strong concern about the legislation, emphasizing the importance of transparency without impeding civil society's ability to operate freely. The EU's [statement](#) underscores the contradiction between Georgia's stated objective of joining the European Union and its regression towards authoritarian practices. The reintroduction of legislation resembling Russia's foreign agent law poses significant threats to Georgia's democratic aspirations on the one hand. It indicates Russia's

growing influence, on the other hand, again putting Georgian civil society in the driver's seat for protecting the country's national interests and its Western future.

Gap Between Policies and Public Opinion

In a theoretical understanding, hybrid warfare aims to dismantle the opponent's capacity to withstand pressure, with victory or defeat being gauged solely by the extent of influence over the adversary's decision-making system. To sway an opponent's decision-making, control over governmental policymaking and the formation of public opinion is essential. In the case of Georgia, Russia has effectively steered governmental policies, which is evident in the narratives and actions of the Georgian Dream party. Yet, public opinion [remains](#) resilient to Russia's extensive information warfare efforts.

Under the guise of manipulating public sentiment, the Georgian Dream flagrantly adopts Kremlin-fueled narratives.

Nonetheless, leveraging all available administrative resources, the Georgian Dream has significantly furthered Russia's information warfare objectives, quelling resistance to Russian influence within society. Under the guise of manipulating public sentiment, the Georgian Dream flagrantly adopts Kremlin-fueled narratives, ludicrously [alleging](#) that the 'global war party'—referring to the West—is endeavoring to involve Georgia in conflict. This exemplifies disinformation and propaganda tactics mirrored from Russian playbooks, aiming to instill fear and bewilderment, thereby fabricating a false dilemma between peace and European integration. Consequently, segments of the population have been intimidated and misled, leading to dis-

orientation and a diminished capacity to advocate for clearly defined interests and principles. The Georgian government aggressively [vilifies](#) those who retain the resilience to resist Russian pressure, branding them as traitors, provocateurs, and xenophobes.

What was once the Georgian Dream's policy of normalizing relations with Russia has devolved into capitulation, relinquishing the ability to make domestic and foreign policy decisions unfavorable to the Kremlin.

Russia's hybrid strategy has notably wielded greater influence over governmental policies. What was once the Georgian Dream's policy of normalizing relations with Russia has devolved into capitulation, relinquishing the ability to make domestic and foreign policy decisions unfavorable to the Kremlin. Consequently, under the pretext of averting conflict, the Georgian Dream openly compromises the nation's strategic interests, evidenced by a complete disengagement from its key allies' interests and value system. This level of influence, reminiscent of Russia's grip on countries like Belarus and Armenia, marks the culmination of efforts to draw nations into its sphere of exclusive influence.

Connecting the Dots

Embedded within its hybrid warfare strategy, Russia applies immense pressure to governmental policy and public opinion. While its grip on policy remains firm and absolute, Russia has failed to influence public opinion significantly. It's within this framework that the Russian law on foreign agents emerges as a critical tool for suppressing civil society and media, serving the interests of Russia and its allies in Georgia. If enacted, this law would give Russia a decisive advantage, enabling it to further

expand its influence in Georgia by severely impeding the ability of Georgian civil society to advocate for democratic and Western-oriented policies. Elevated by the influx of Russian citizens and capital, alongside deepening trade and economic dependencies, the adoption of this law would signify a point of no return in consolidating autocratic governance and derailing Georgia's foreign policy from the Euro-Atlantic path.

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The end of April 2024 marked a pivotal moment in Georgia's political landscape. Bidzina Ivanishvili, the influential founder and honorary chairman of the Georgian Dream party, delivered a [speech](#) that could reshape Georgia's foreign policy. For the first time in recent history, a key policymaker openly declared the West as an enemy of Georgia and announced repressions against those who oppose

this course, signaling a dramatic shift towards an anti-Western stance.

Georgian Dream has made it very clear that they view the West as posing a threat to Georgia's sovereignty and national (read – “party”) interests. This would inevitably cause a reaction from the US and the EU. It is essential that the Western response does not damage the interests of the Georgian people or Georgia's interests. Instead, measures could be implemented to ensure that those advocating for a pro-Russian agenda are held accountable for their actions.

In tandem with the EU, the US should announce a package of pre-emptive sanctions, including travel restrictions and asset freezes, applicable to all MPs voting for the law on foreign agents, as well as the officials who openly support pro-Russian policies, as advocated by Bidzina Ivanishvili. Targeting the personal interests of these individuals and their families sends a clear message that actions detrimental to Georgia's sovereignty will not be tolerated while safeguarding the broader national interests. This strategy can also serve as a deterrent against further attempts to undermine Georgia's European choice and independence ■

Eastern Partnership – Still Relevant, or Redundant?

The day 7 May 2024 marks the 15th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was created to deepen political and economic relations between the EU, its member states, and six EaP partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. One of the critical achievements of the EaP is that it drew the dividing lines between the European neighbors (which included the countries to the east of the EU) and neighbors of Europe (countries bordering the EU from the south, from North Africa to the Middle East).

The EaP initiative was a significant attainment for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, all three having historical aspirations to eventually join the EU and be treated by the EU as European countries rather than just neighbors. These three have been asking for a tailor-made approach as opposed to a 'one size fits all' policy offered by the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Moreover, the ENP provided the perspective of the European Neighborhood Agreement, which was not an exciting prospect for countries that did not want to stay as neighbors forever.

From Transformative to Redundant

The Eastern Partnership was initiated several months after Russia attacked Georgia in August 2008. Launching a new strategic program for the eastern neighbors was a signal that the EU cared about its neighbors and would not accept Russia treating them as its backyard. Back then, EaP and the instruments it contained promised great transformative potential.

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The three pro-European states - Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine - seized the moment and started approximation with the EU by undertaking necessary reforms. All three signed the Association Agreements, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), and received visa-free travel to the EU and Schengen zone coun-



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tries. This erected the natural fence within the EaP - creating the “Trio Format” on the one hand and leaving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus in the second tier. However, after Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia received EU candidate status in 2022 and 2023, the Eastern partnership appeared to have lost its relevance.

Today, EaP is still rolling on inertia. The Trio states switched their focus to accession, and the remaining beneficiaries are the states that prefer partnership over accession. Armenia is keen to revive the EU integration process but needs to cross some painful geopolitical red lines like abandoning the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); Azerbaijan is not interested in European integration and wants to strengthen its position as a key regional player providing natural gas to the EU. The EU and Azerbaijan [signed](#) the Memorandum of Understanding to double the natural gas import from Azerbaijan to at least 20 billion cubic meters annually by 2027. Belarus's presence in the Eastern Partnership is simply irrelevant since

its government and authoritarian leader, Aleksandr Lukashenko, are not recognized as legitimately elected.

The EU member states do not seem optimistic about the EaP prospects either.

The EU member states do not seem optimistic about the EaP prospects either. The EaP's biannual summits initially were hosted by the Member states (2009 Czechia, 2011 Poland, 2013 Lithuania, 2015 Latvia), but after that, they slowly moved to Brussels. The last one was held in 2021, and at the time of writing, there is no enthusiasm to organize one, even to celebrate 15 years since the format's inception.

The EaP's multilateral track also needs to be patched. Two of its members, Armenia and Azerbaijan, were at war just a few months ago; Ukraine and Georgia have all but severed bilateral relations, and Moldova and Georgia rarely engage at the

highest political level. There are almost no regional cooperation projects among the Trio states and Belarus has been assisting Russia against Ukraine, including by allowing the transit of military forces through its territory.

Since its inception, the EaP has been only partially successful. It made the EU the number one trade partner for four out of six EaP states and broadly contributed to setting up and developing thousands of new small and medium-sized enterprises. It also upgraded the level of political relations between the EaP states and the EU. After all, the non-signature of the Association Agreement led to the change of government in Ukraine.

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However, the EaP, as a format, was not equipped to deal with serious challenges. Five of the six EaP countries have territorial conflicts stirred by Russia, and neither security nor conflict resolution has ever been a serious agenda item for the EaP. It also fell short of building a common area of shared values of democracy, prosperity, stability, and increased cooperation. According to Freedom House data, two of the six EaP countries – Azerbaijan and Belarus – belong to countries with consolidated authoritarian regimes. The remaining four are transitional or hybrid regimes. All the more, once a poster child of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia has recently taken a full swing towards authoritarianism.

The future of the EaP does not look bright either.

The future of the EaP does not look bright either. Moldova will have a crucial presidential election in the autumn of 2024 and a referendum on joining the EU. This will happen against the background of increased risks and information manipulation from Russia aimed at [destabilizing](#) the country.

Ukraine is engaged in a war of survival with Russia, with unclear prospects and timelines for peace. As for Georgia, there is a high chance that the ruling anti-European Georgian Dream party will introduce the Russian-style foreign agents' law, effectively killing civil society and the critical media and keeping unchecked and unaccountable power for a fourth consecutive term. These divergent trends will highly likely undermine the EaP format even further.

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By now, the EaP has lost its attractiveness for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, while it was never genuinely interesting for Azerbaijan and Belarus. Unless the EU finds ways to transform the format, it will remain a loose partnership of unwilling and unable states without political ambitions. However, dealing with the hybrid threats from Russia, promoting small and medium-sized enterprises, and enhancing connectivity could still save the EaP from staying toothless.

One of the most significant achievements the EaP has brought to some of its partners is visa liberalization. Encouraged by the promise of visa-free travel, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia improved document security, border management, and personal data protection. As a result, their citizens were granted the opportunity to travel visa-free to EU and Schengen zone countries. Extending visa liberalization to Armenia could seriously incentivize Yerevan to continue Europeanization and decrease its dependence on Russia.

Armenia – New Hope for the EaP?

In 2013, Armenia was close to signing the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU.

Offering an ambitious Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) would help Armenia improve border management, enhance document security and personal data protection, and protect human rights in exchange for receiving visa-free travel.

However, Putin cornered then-President Serzh Sargsyan into refusing to sign the deal and joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union instead. But ten years later, after losing Karabakh, Armenia is trying to engage closer with the European Union, despite not having a large room for maneuver because of the memberships of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). At this stage, EU-Armenia relations are regulated by the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), and due to close economic and trade ties with Russia, the EU is not in a position to offer Armenia AA/DCFTA. However, EaP and EU member states can support Armenia's European aspirations and provide at least two carrots. In the short term, this could be visa liberalization, provided that the country takes gradual steps to carry out necessary reforms. Offering an ambitious Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) would help Armenia improve border management, enhance document security and personal data protection, and protect human rights in exchange for receiving visa-free travel. This would also send the signal to ordinary Armenians that the EU cares about them.

Meanwhile, the EU should consider giving Armenia a European perspective. This move would not cost much to the EU. The EU granted the candidate status to Georgia in December 2024, which positioned the EU as a geopolitical player bold enough to step into the South Caucasus region and compete with Russia. This time, the bold decision might encourage the Armenian elite to push for reforms and consolidate pro-European forces.

The European Union can also consider offering some concrete steps that countries like Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia are already benefitting from, such as lowering the roaming tariffs to Armenia's citizens and considering that Armenia joins the Single European Payment Area (SEPA). Being part of SEPA could be beneficial for a sizeable Armenian diaspora that regularly uses bank transfer services.

Competing with China and Russia

To reform the EaP, the EU must acknowledge that it competes with Russia, China, and Türkiye in the region. This competition showcases that European integration is not the only game in the region. Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations are based on security guarantees and military assistance, which was instrumental in Baku gaining victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Russia fully controls Belarus, leaving no room for the EU to step in. Georgia has [signed](#) a Free Trade Agreement with China and [announced](#) that its relations with Beijing now rank as a strategic partnership. With the Belt and Road Initiative, China aspires to expand its influence on other EaP countries as well through the connectivity carrot. The Middle Corridor's [potential](#) will likely serve as an incentive for allowing Chinese actors to participate in important regional projects such as the Anaklia deep sea port on the Black Sea.

The last 15 years have demonstrated that EU normative power and values clash with realpolitik in the Eastern Partnership region. The EU must become strategic about its plans for the EaP, which, together with the success stories of Europeanization and concrete benefits for the participating nations, also includes developing sophisticated and targeted strategic communication. Building societal resilience in the EaP region towards foreign malign influence, disinformation, and interference is another aspect that the EU must keep as a priority for the Eastern Partnership region ■

Georgia's Lost Potential to Support North Caucasus Decolonization

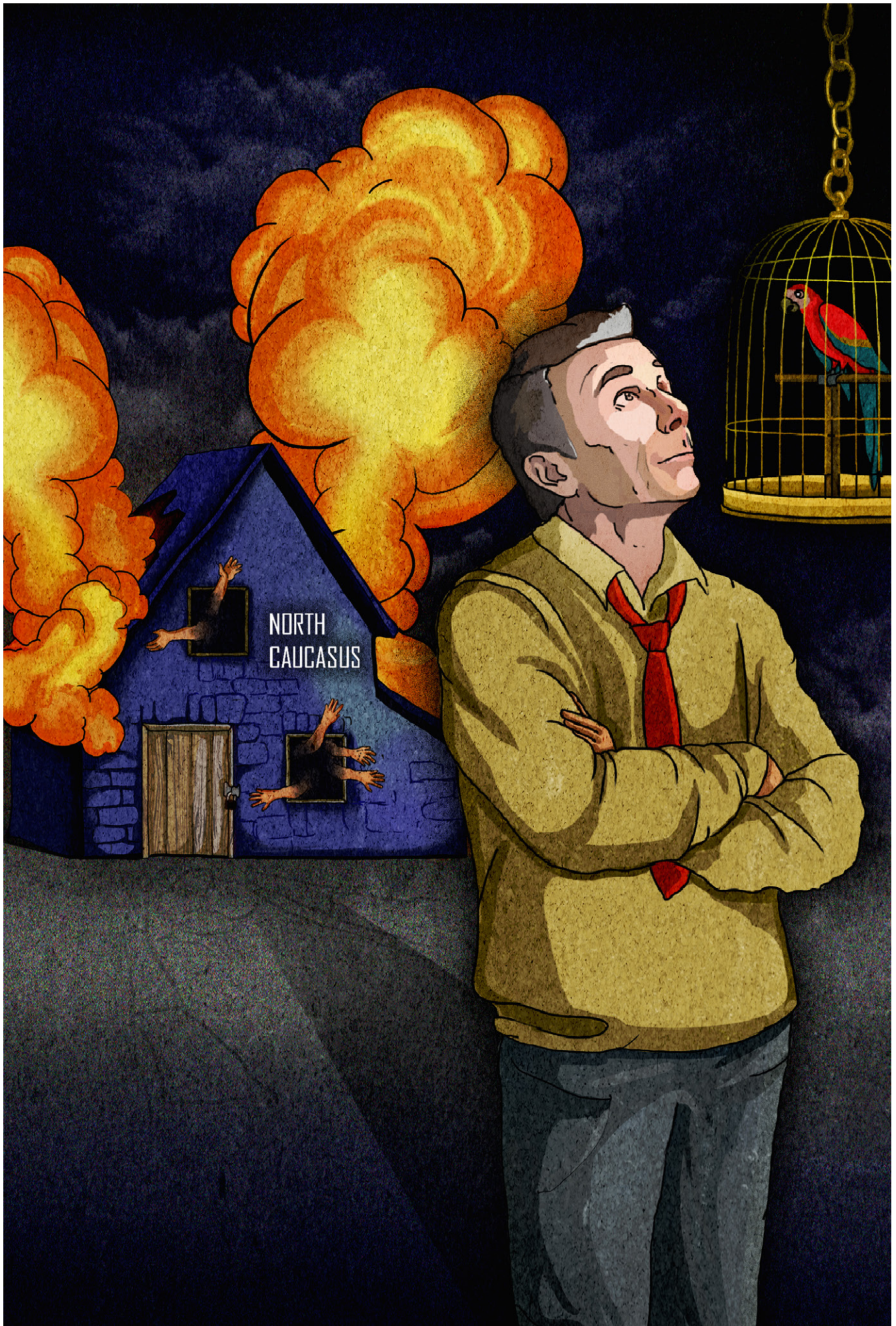
In the tumultuous 1990s, amid the intense violence of the Chechen war, a remarkable shift occurred among all my Chechen friends and acquaintances—they abruptly ceased drinking alcohol. Instead, as a gesture of camaraderie, they would raise a glass of water in toast, proclaiming: “Za vas, za nas, za svobodnyi Kavkaz!” (For you, for us, for the free Caucasus). While the toast itself was ancient, originating from Soviet times, the concluding phrase had been modified from “Severnyi (North) Kavkaz” to “Svobodnyi (Free) Kavkaz.” Through conversations with scholarly colleagues from the North Caucasus, I consistently encountered a deep-seated appreciation for Georgia, both politically and culturally. As one of my Dagestani friends, a professor expressed it, Georgia was viewed as “the only truly Caucasian nation in the South Caucasus.”

Throughout history, Georgia has grappled with the dilemma of whether to engage in the affairs of the North Caucasus or to remain aloof, sometimes even aligning tacitly, if not actively, with the colonizer's agenda. Georgia's pursuit of independence and its security and foreign policy orientations towards the West has consistently recognized the importance of a free North Caucasus under Russian influence. Consequently, all patriotic political factions in Georgia, whether predominantly liberal or nationalistic, have, to some degree, endorsed the notion of North Caucasian emancipation. Consequently, assuming that Georgia's European aspirations and its active engagement with its North Caucasian neighbors are mutually exclusive is misleading. Rather, these two policies complement each other, collectively bolstering Georgia's independence. However, the current Georgian



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government diverges from this historical stance, prioritizing accommodation with Russia over this traditional policy.

Russia-North Caucasus: a Form of Colonial Governance

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia's relations with the North Caucasus share several characteristics with the imperial and colonial conditions of the 19th century. In addition to the heavy presence of the military and other federal security services, the region is managed by co-opted local elites, reminiscent of ancient colonial auxiliaries or proxies. Through these proxies, Moscow [controls](#) the local populations more effectively, namely by securing electoral support, while in exchange, the local elites benefit from the generous redistribution of resources from the central budget and can expect the "federal stick" in the event of an internal challenge.

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Today, Russia's status as a federation appears more nominal than substantive, resembling a classic colonial empire in many aspects. Similar to historical imperial frameworks, the allegiance of peripheral elites holds greater significance than ideological or cultural unity. Despite Ramzan Kadyrov's adherence to a more fundamentalist interpretation and promotion of Islam compared to most independence fighters like Dzhokhar Dudayev and Aslan Maskhadov, his loyalty to Putin outweighs other considerations. The loyalty of local elites remains a fragile phenomenon, reminiscent of historical colonial empires where proxies eventually embraced roles as champions of independence during sig-

nificant shifts in circumstances. This prospect is feasible in today's Russian Caucasus, given the relative receptiveness of local populations to diverse ethnic nationalist discourses. In certain cases, such as Chechnya, national narratives are overtly anti-Russian and anti-colonial. While declaring unwavering loyalty to Putin, Ramzan Kadyrov also presents himself as a Chechen nationalist, suggesting that he could readily adapt as the leader of an independent Chechnya should the Russian state falter.

However, for the time being, the imperial agreement appears to be effective, as the Caucasus is relatively tranquil after two turbulent decades marked by hundreds of thousands of deaths. The insurgency has dwindled to a minimum, manifesting only in sporadic, minor-scale attacks. The decline in resistance ranks can be attributed not only to the severity of violence employed by the federal authorities but also to the emigration of the most politically committed individuals and the mass exodus of militant Islamists between 2013 and 2019 to Syria and Iraq, [facilitated](#) by Russian state intelligence. Moreover, the shift in Georgia's stance and policies following the rise of the Georgian Dream to power in 2012 has also weakened protest strength in the North Caucasus. Consequently, the bulk of the Caucasian anti-colonial movement is now evident in the diaspora, predominantly in Europe and Türkiye.

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Caucasus. Alongside Chechen battalions that have supported Ukraine since 2014, new units from Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Chechnya have emerged on Ukrainian soil. These volunteer groups often proclaim their ultimate objective as the liberation of the Caucasus from Russian hegemony, viewing Russia's defeat in Ukraine as a prerequisite for their political agenda's success. Although the decolonization movement may appear subdued within regions under Russian Federation control, subtle signs of unrest are surfacing alongside a more outspoken diaspora voice.

Georgia's pre-2012 Discreet Support to the North Caucasus

If Ukraine presently emerges as the foremost advocate for decolonization movements in the North Caucasus, it's partly due to the absence of Georgia's involvement in this arena. Notably, the current Georgian administration not only diverges from its predecessors, including the Saakashvili (2004-2012) and the Shevardnadze (1995-2003) governments but also deviates from the policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's initial post-Soviet president (1990-1992), who pursued a strategy of reconciliation with the North Caucasus. Following pressures to permit Russian airstrikes on Chechnya during the first Chechen conflict (1994-1996), Georgia's leadership displayed courage by rejecting Russian demands for joint control over the Chechen border and the utilization of Russian military bases on Georgian soil against Chechen forces. Shevardnadze, a former Communist leader and senior Soviet figure, took a significant stride of defiance against Russia, which had asserted full control over Georgia's security policy following the disastrous Abkhaz conflict. The Chechen victory and subsequent de facto independence (1996-1998) provided Georgia with greater maneuverability and confidence to pursue a Western-oriented policy.

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Shevardnadze established cordial relations with Ichkeria's president, Maskhadov, who [visited](#) Tbilisi in 1997. At that time, Chechnya officially issued regret for the participation of many of its nationals in the war of Abkhazian secession, and several leading figures of the Chechen armed resistance denounced the support once given to the separatists.

During Saakashvili's tenure, Russia had already achieved success in military operations against the insurgency in Chechnya. Initially, Georgia attempted cooperation with Russia on North Caucasus security matters, anticipating a more constructive stance from Moscow regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, following the failure of these efforts and the Russian invasion and occupation of these regions in 2008, Georgia shifted its North Caucasus policy towards supporting the idea of a liberated Caucasus. This shift involved providing asylum to persecuted North Caucasian activists from Russia and serving as a venue for conferences and seminars bringing together dissidents from the region. Georgia also sought to establish connections with North Caucasian diasporas in Europe, the USA, Türkiye, and the Middle East, aiming to leverage their influence to foster better relations with North Caucasian populations.

In May 2011, Georgia [recognized](#) the Circassian genocide by parliamentary vote, and to this day remains the only country in the world to do so. A few months later, Georgia created the Circassian Cultural Center in Tbilisi, which [turned](#) into an essential place for research, reflection, and meetings between the Circassian world's various academic, associative, and cultural circles. The

Russian Federation considered both actions to be unfriendly acts. Russian participants (mainly from Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Adygea) in the conferences held at the Cherkess Cultural Center in Tbilisi were viewed with suspicion by the Russian authorities. The human rights organization Memorial has often [denounced](#) the interrogations and searches carried out on visitors to this cultural center.

In 2011, the Saakashvili government also [launched](#) PIK (Pervyi Informacionnyi Kavkazskii - First Caucasus Information Channel), a Russian-language satellite TV channel aimed at the populations of the North Caucasus. Russia tried to jam the channel's waves or directly pressure the companies owning the satellites that broadcast it. In the end, Georgia's newly elected GD government cut financing of the channel and [dismantled](#) it a few weeks after winning the elections in October 2012.

Free Caucasus: No Longer Interesting for Tbilisi

Presently, the foremost objective of the Georgian regime is to appease Russia, leading to a notable shift in the government's approach towards the region. The Georgian Dream government perceives the North Caucasus as a zone of potential threat and interprets developments in the area primarily through a Russian perspective. Consequently, any actions by Georgia directed towards the populations of this region are deemed unfavorable, as they could provoke Russia. As a result, Caucasian pro-decolonization activists no longer view Georgia as a refuge. Numerous instances exist where politically engaged individuals from North Caucasian republics have been denied entry into Georgia. Some were even [extradited](#) to Russia. Despite a visa-free regime with the Russian Federation, it is much easier for a resident of Moscow or Novosibirsk to travel to Georgia than for a Chechen or Cherkess living a few kilometers

from the Georgian border. According to testimonies from citizens of the North Caucasus republics, the Georgian authorities allegedly rely on lists provided by the Russian intelligence services to prevent undesirable personalities from entering the country.

The emblematic portrayal of the Georgian government's stance is exemplified by the [case](#) of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a Georgian citizen of Chechen (Kisti) descent. Khangoshvili, a participant in the second Chechen war fighting against Russian forces, engaged in operations against Russian Federal troops and FSB special forces in Ingushetia and Dagestan. Later, in 2007, he enlisted in the Georgian army and assumed leadership of the anti-terrorist center in the Pankisi Gorge. Following the Georgian Dream's assumption of power, Russian intelligence services, viewing Georgia as a convenient arena, made an [assassination attempt](#) on Khangoshvili in Tbilisi. Despite being a veteran officer, the Georgian government declined to provide him with security assurances, compelling him to seek refuge in Germany, where he awaited a decision on his political asylum request. Tragically, Khangoshvili was assassinated in Berlin in August 2019 by a high-ranking Russian operative apprehended by German authorities. Subsequently, the German government officially [indicted](#) Russia for state-sponsored terrorism. However, throughout the investigation and media coverage of the incident, Georgia, despite Khangoshvili being its national, remained conspicuously silent, offering no official reaction.

In recent times, Georgian authorities have fostered ties with the official political and administrative elites in the North Caucasus, acting as Moscow's regional representatives. This collaboration primarily centers around security and intelligence matters, given the limited trade between Georgia and its neighboring regions to the north. The focus of cooperation is largely on

monitoring North Caucasian individuals residing in Georgia. Additionally, Georgian authorities depend on their counterparts from the North Caucasus to oversee the religious activities within Georgia's Dagestani (predominantly Avar) and Vainakh (Kisti) communities. Observers have noted the increasing influence of networks affiliated with Ramzan Kadyrov in Pankisi, with tacit acknowledgment from Georgian authorities. Notably, a recent development saw the appointment of an imam closely associated with Kadyrov despite being a native of the gorge. This new imam was [dispatched](#) by the Chechen Muftiate, which operates under Kadyrov's direct control.

Kadyrov, who has a history of making anti-Georgian statements, appears to maintain communication channels with Georgia. Some visits by prominent figures close to Kadyrov have been observable but not officially acknowledged. For instance, in 2018, the mayor of Grozny and, subsequently, the Prime Minister of Chechnya, Muslim Khuchiev, visited Georgia purportedly as a tourist, although media reports [revealed](#) he had several high-level meetings with Georgian officials. In another instance, Chechen businessman Aslambek Akhmetkhanov, previously disgraced but rehabilitated by Kadyrov, [visited](#) Georgia in the summer of 2023 with a conspicuous motorcade flouting traffic regulations. Georgian authorities once again disclaimed the official nature of this visit.

Despite his allegiance to Moscow, Kadyrov seems to understand the strategic importance of Georgia as the only gateway to the outside world for Chechnya.

Georgia is a complex issue for Kadyrov. During Saakashvili's tenure, Georgia was reviled and portrayed as an ally of the Western "Great Satan,"

with Kadyrov threatening to send his troops to Georgia in support of his ultimate master, Vladimir Putin. However, Kadyrov also recognizes Georgia's significance as the sole independent state bordering Chechnya outside of the Russian Federation. Despite his allegiance to Moscow, Kadyrov seems to understand the strategic importance of Georgia as the only gateway to the outside world for Chechnya. His loyalty to Moscow (not Putin) is not so unequivocal, as he has amassed unprecedented power, consistently challenging the official structures of the Russian state and displaying overt disregard for Russian laws and constitution. Kadyrov has secured significant concessions for his Republic from Putin, surpassing those achieved by pro-independence leaders such as Maskhadov and Dudayev. In the event of strained relations with Moscow, Kadyrov may find Georgia crucial, making relations with it potentially critical for his future.

For this reason, Kadyrov, like his predecessors, regards the construction of the Grozny-Itumkale-Shatili road to Georgia as strategically vital for Chechnya. Although initiated in the 1990s during Chechnya's de facto independence, the project remains incomplete. The Chechen segment is near completion, lacking only a few kilometers. Kadyrov consistently advocates for the road's opening, emphasizing its economic and practical advantages (currently, traveling from Chechnya to Georgia requires a lengthy detour through North Ossetia and the Lars checkpoint). He has stressed that this route would not only connect Chechnya to Georgia but also to Türkiye, Iran, and European nations. To persuade Moscow to support the project, Kadyrov has even [highlighted](#) Georgia's growing significance for Russia amidst Western sanctions. However, Russia's central authority has yet to take decisive action to facilitate the project's progress. Meanwhile, the Georgian government has shown no initiative in constructing its portion of the highway.

Georgia's Unexploited Potential

Georgia holds a significant position in the political consciousness of North Caucasians, a fact often overlooked by the vast majority of Georgians. Paradoxically, decades, if not centuries, of Russian and Soviet imperial and colonial policies have aimed at severing ties between the peoples on both sides of the Caucasus, fostering division, and instigating conflict. In the 19th century, many members of the Georgian nobility were offered prominent positions in the Tsarist army and participated in the conquest of the North Caucasus. However, the war in Abkhazia (1992-93), where numerous North Caucasians fought against Tbilisi, further strained relations, largely due to Moscow's influence. Consequently, North Caucasians are considerably less acquainted with Georgians, despite their cultural and geographical proximity, compared to Russians. Conversely, Georgians possess minimal knowledge about North Caucasian societies and seldom venture to this region.

Despite this, research indicates that the perceptions and attitudes of North Caucasians towards Georgians and the Georgian state differ from those in other regions of the Russian Federation and are generally more positive. A comprehensive [study](#) conducted by the Ebert Foundation in 2021 revealed that, despite the influence of Russian propaganda, even in North Ossetia, which holds the most negative disposition towards Georgia

among Caucasian republics, opinions on Georgia tended to be more favorable compared to all other non-Caucasian regions of the Russian Federation. Among the seven republics of the North Caucasus, Ingushetia and Chechnya exhibited the most favorable views towards Georgia, followed by Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and North Ossetia.

Georgia plays a crucial role in the prospective decolonization of the region.

Experience and current public opinion in the North Caucasus indicate that Georgia plays a crucial role in the prospective decolonization of the region. Against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine and Kyiv's efforts to serve as a platform for all liberation movements among Russia's colonized peoples, additional support from Georgia could have significantly shifted the power balance against Russia. However, the current government has opted for a different path, one of collaboration with Moscow. Ironically, the Georgian government justifies its criticism of Europe and European values by emphasizing its attachment to Georgia's Caucasian identity. In reality, the policy of the Georgian Dream party turns its back on the aspirations for freedom and independence of the Caucasian people. It neither aligns with European values nor supports Caucasian interests; instead, it leans towards a pro-Russian stance ■

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