
GEO POLITICS

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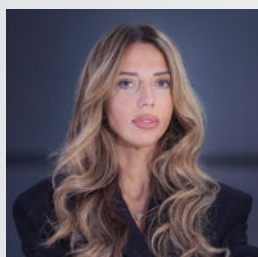
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual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

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

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



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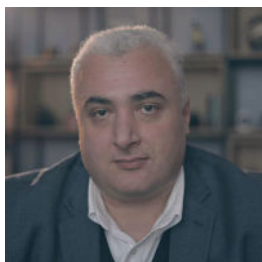
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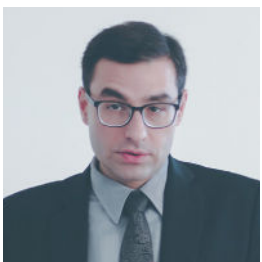
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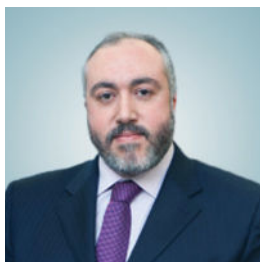
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With Eyes Wide Shut Blind Spots in European Security Can Become New Battlefields

The world's gaze remains locked on Ukraine, where war, diplomacy, and geopolitics collide in high-stakes negotiations that will shape the future of European security. Every military advance, every peace talk, and every shift in Washington's stance dominates headlines, reinforcing Ukraine's centrality in the global order. Yet, there are blind spots of European security, which, if unaddressed, could cause new waves of instability down the road. Security guarantees for Ukraine and a viable architecture of a new European security order are among those. Georgia, meanwhile is slipping into the authoritarian abyss, its democracy strangled by the very forces that once rhetorically promised European integration. While Brussels and Washington scramble to influence Kyiv's fate, Tbilisi's quiet descent into illiberal rule, Russian encroachment, and internal repression requires more attention.

The West, once the guardian of Georgia's democratic aspirations, needs to realize that the country's fate is already an emergency. From USAID's collapse to creeping Russian annexation in Abkhazia, from the Georgian Dream's new authoritarian laws to continued hundred days of protest by hundreds and thousands of Georgians - the warnings are all there—ignored, dismissed, or delayed. Make no mistake—Georgia's unraveling is not just a domestic crisis; it is another front in the same war for Europe's future. *GEOpolitics* contin-

ues to explore these developments through a new batch of six articles, focusing on the most relevant up-to-date foreign and domestic political topics, facing Ukraine, Georgia and the wider region.

Shota Gvineria opens this issue by analyzing the dramatic shift in U.S. policy under President Trump, signaling a move from open-ended support for Ukraine to prioritizing a quick ceasefire, even at the possible cost of Ukrainian and European security interests. Russia remains uncompromising, demanding Ukraine's demilitarization, NATO exclusion, and territorial concessions, while Kyiv insists on security guarantees and a full restoration of its sovereignty. Trump's "trump cards" include personal investment in ending the war, economic interests in Ukraine's minerals, and a willingness to pressure only Kyiv, signaling potential U.S.-Russia bargaining over Europe's security architecture. Europe, sidelined but ardent, is scrambling to bolster its defense spending and ensure Ukraine's sovereignty remains non-negotiable. A possible peace deal could revisit elements of the March-April 2022 Kyiv-Moscow talks, but fundamental obstacles—territorial integrity, security guarantees, and Russia's global ambitions—make any agreement precarious. For Georgia, the implications are dire—detached from Western security debates and politically aligned with Moscow, Tbilisi risks being left in a geopolitical no man's land, regardless of how the Ukraine war and peace talks end.

Thornike Gordadze highlights how Trump's policies have finally forced Europeans to confront the reality that they can no longer rely on the United States for their security. The era of half-measures is over—America has either largely withdrawn or is no longer a dependable ally. Despite differing approaches among Europe's four major powers (France, Germany, the UK, and Italy), a clear consensus has emerged around two key objectives. The immediate priority is to provide Ukraine with greater and more effective support to compensate for the loss of U.S. backing. The longer-term strategic goal is to build an integrated European defense system, including a strengthened defense industry. Within this framework, Ukraine is set to play a central role, given the strength and battlefield experience of its military, as well as its growing defense sector. Any responsible government in Georgia should align its policies with this vision—seeking to follow Ukraine's path and position itself as a strategic part of this new European security architecture.

Temuri Yakobashvili examines how Trump's second presidency dismantles the existing international system, reshapes U.S. foreign policy, and causes global instability. Trump's administration is aggressively pushing America First policy, abandoning alliances, and questioning Pax Americana, while simultaneously flirting with Russia to weaken its dependence on China. This shift manifests in pressuring Ukraine into a minerals' deal without security guarantees, sidelining NATO allies, and reconfiguring global economic and security structures. Meanwhile, China's economic dominance, AI advancements, and trade expansion threaten Western leadership, yet Trump's policies risk isolating the U.S. rather than strengthening it. With alliances crumbling and Russia potentially being courted as a counterweight to Beijing, the world faces a profound geopolitical realignment, one that could under-

mine Western unity and accelerate the collapse of the rules-based global order.

Vano Chkhikvadze zooms into Georgian reality, arguing that Brussels' passive and reactive approach to Georgia's authoritarian drift is no longer sustainable. The Georgian Dream's suspension of the EU accession process, its crackdown on civil society and media, and its growing alignment with autocratic regimes signal a deliberate break from the European path. The Association Agreement is under threat, and Georgia may follow Iceland in withdrawing from the EU accession process entirely, albeit for political survival rather than economic pragmatism. Meanwhile, economic realignment with Russia and China erodes the EU's leverage, and a diplomatic freeze-out of European envoys could be next. The EU's previous strategy—offering candidate status “on credit” and waiting for the Georgian Dream to realign—has failed. Instead, Brussels must impose concrete consequences for democratic backsliding, prepare for a worst-case scenario of complete disengagement, and strategically recalibrate its policies to maintain influence. Without a harder stance, Georgia risks becoming another Belarus or Azerbaijan, and the EU will find itself powerless to stop the country's authoritarian transformation.

Jaba Devdariani continues the topic of Georgian domestic politics, by examining the devastating impact of the abrupt suspension of USAID operations, which has severely weakened Georgia's civil society sector amid an ongoing authoritarian crackdown by the Georgian Dream. With over 2,000 jobs lost and a collapse in funding for governance and democracy programs, the vacuum left by USAID's exit is unlikely to be filled by the EU, whose funding is not yet adaptable to local CSO needs. This comes at a time when the Georgian Dream is aggressively squeezing indepen-

dent organizations through new repressive laws, disinformation, and intimidation, while also fostering government-sponsored NGOs (GONGOs) to absorb foreign aid. As professionals leave or pivot to other sectors, the country faces a severe brain drain and the erosion of democratic safeguards. The article calls on EU donors to overhaul their strategy, redirecting funds toward independent media, human rights defenders, and rapid response aid, while halting governance programs that risk legitimizing the ruling party's autocratic consolidation.

Sergi Kapanadze closes the Issue with an analysis of the events in and around Abkhazia. The recent de facto elections, where Moscow-backed candidate Badra Gunba won, reaffirmed Russia's total political control, though local resistance against

Russian dominance persists. The 2008 recognition of Abkhazia's "independence" was, in reality, a geopolitical trap, cementing Abkhazia's reliance on Russian financial aid, military oversight, and strategic exploitation. To counter Russia's creeping annexation, the article proposes an anti-annexation policy, status-neutral engagement with Abkhazia, an increase in financial spending and revitalized higher level efforts to raise the profile of the conflict. If Europe continues to ignore Abkhazia, it risks allowing another Moscow-orchestrated annexation—one that could have been prevented with a proactive and strategic response ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

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SERGI KAPANADZE

The Cost of Peace in Ukraine

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's White House [visit](#) on 28 February 2025 was far more than just an emotional outburst or a moment of political theater – “great television,” as President Trump labeled it. It marked a decisive turning point in the U.S. approach to the war in Ukraine. After three years of [strategic ambiguity](#), during which Washington [avoided](#) clear commitments to the war's objectives or an acceptable endgame, the shift is striking.

The U.S. seems to have now moved from a stance of supporting Ukraine “for as long as it takes” to prioritizing a quick resolution and a ceasefire, even at the cost of long-term Ukrainian interests. Trump's team made it clear that it now positions itself as a neutral broker between Ukraine and Russia in pursuit of a peace deal and that Washington has its economic interests in Ukraine – rare earth elements and minerals.

These developments raise questions about the cost and meaning of peace. Rather than exploring theoretical options, we will examine publicly

stated positions of key stakeholders to assess what a peace deal might entail and what the costs and long-term consequences of such a deal would be for Ukraine, wider European security and Georgia.

Russia's Wants

In December 2021, Russia issued a series of ultimatums to [NATO](#) and [the U.S.](#) aimed at redefining the post-Cold War European security architecture. These demands included a legally binding guarantee that NATO would cease any military activity in Ukraine and the entire Eastern Europe, effectively rolling back the alliance's presence and posture to its pre-1997 status. This would have entailed the withdrawal of NATO forces and infrastructure from member states that joined after 1997, significantly diminishing its footprint not only in the former Soviet Baltic region, but even in the area covering the former Warsaw Pact in Central and Eastern Europe.

That Russia's ultimatums were addressed to Brussels and Washington in December 2021, rather than to Kyiv, indicates that the war was never



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about Ukraine and that Ukraine could have done nothing to prevent it. Putin's regular [attempts](#) to twist history to justify Russia's aggression against Ukraine, are well encapsulated in Aleksandr Dugin's [statement](#): "Without Ukraine, Russia cannot become the empire once more. With Ukraine inside the Russian zone of control, it will become the empire again."

That Russia's ultimatums were addressed to Brussels and Washington in December 2021, rather than to Kyiv, indicates that the war was never about Ukraine and that Ukraine could have done nothing to prevent it.

On 24 February 2022, President Vladimir Putin [announced](#) a "special military operation" with the stated goals of "demilitarization and denazifica-

tion" of Ukraine, justifying the invasion as a necessary measure to protect Russian-speaking populations from alleged "humiliation and genocide" by the Kyiv regime. Moscow [set](#) four key conditions: (1) no return to previous agreements such as the Minsk Accords, (2) a permanent block on Ukraine's NATO membership, (3) the mandatory demilitarization and "denazification" of Ukraine, and (4) the full achievement of Russia's stated military goals.

By requiring Ukraine to strip itself of defensive capabilities, accept the loss of its sovereign land, and place its security in the hands of the very aggressor that had invaded it, Russia demonstrated that it was never genuinely interested in ending the war through compromise.

These goals have remained [unchanged](#) throughout the war. By requiring Ukraine to strip itself of defensive capabilities, accept the loss of its sovereign land, and place its security in the hands of the very aggressor that had invaded it, Russia demonstrated that it was never genuinely interested in ending the war through compromise. Instead, its objective remains the defeat of Ukrainian resistance and the full political and military subjugation of Ukraine.

In June 2024, Vladimir Putin [outlined](#) anew the Russian vision for stopping the “special military operation” and bringing a definitive resolution rather than a temporary ceasefire. The core demand remains the full withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics” as well as the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions. In return, Putin expressed readiness to engage in immediate negotiations. Alongside this, Ukraine must adopt a neutral and non-aligned status, ensuring it remains outside military alliances like NATO, while also committing to being nuclear-free and undergoing demilitarization and denazification.

A crucial component of Putin’s demands is the recognition of new territorial realities, meaning Ukraine and the international community must formally accept Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia as part of the Russian Federation. Moscow also insists on guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of Russian-speaking citizens in Ukraine, positioning this as a necessary condition for peace. These terms, according to Putin, should be enshrined in international agreements, ensuring their long-term enforcement. Additionally, Russia demands the complete removal of Western sanctions against Russia, portraying this as an essential step toward normalization.

Putin framed this proposal as an opportunity to end the war and rebuild global relations between Ukraine, Russia, and Europe. By resolving the conflict, Moscow suggests that a new era of regional stability could emerge, with Russia, its allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)

and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and willing European nations working together to establish an “indivisible Eurasian security system.” In the Kremlin’s view, this would create a framework that accounts for the interests of all nations on the continent.

To sum up, Moscow’s declared goals are still maximalist and no real discussion has hitherto taken place on what the Kremlin would concede in exchange for a stop of the hostilities and which elements of its articulated positions it is ready to give up in a wider peace agreement.

Ukraine’s Needs

Unlike Russia’s whimsical wants, which effectively equal Ukraine’s capitulation, the West’s acceptance of Russian territorial expansion, and acquiescence to a new Russia-dominated Eurasian security order, Ukraine has actively sought a just resolution of the war, largely based on international law and the existing rules and principles of the European and the global security order.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s [10-point peace plan](#) in October 2022 called for the restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, the withdrawal of Russian troops, and accountability for war crimes. It addressed nuclear safety, food security, and energy stability while demanding the return of deported Ukrainians, including children forcibly taken to Russia.

In October 2024, Zelenskyy introduced a comprehensive five-point [“Victory Plan”](#) to resolve the ongoing conflict with Russia. The plan included (1) an unconditional NATO invitation, (2) military defense by strengthening Ukraine’s forces with advanced weaponry, partner support, and targeted operations against Russian aggression, (3) a non-nuclear deterrence strategy aimed at pressuring Russia into diplomacy or weakening its war machine, (4) leveraging its vast reserves of critical resources—

such as uranium, titanium, and lithium—through strategic partnerships and (5) a post-war security framework in which Ukrainian troops would contribute to NATO's collective defense, reinforcing stability in Europe. Three secret annexes detailed further strategic measures, shared only with select allies.

The Ukrainian position on the major components of the peace agreement has evolved in light of the disastrous 28 February Oval Office meeting. On 4 March, Zelenskyy [confirmed](#) that a ceasefire would be possible if it entailed “the release of prisoners and a truce in the sky — a ban on missiles, long-ranged drones, bombs on energy and other civilian infrastructure — and a truce at sea.” He also stated that Ukraine is ready to sign the “agreement on minerals and security” and that this agreement is viewed as “a step toward greater security and solid security guarantees.”

Ukraine has made it clear that it is ready to engage constructively in the ceasefire-related talks, however, no broader peace deal would be possible without serious security guarantees and the resolution of the existing territorial dispute with Russia.

In summary, Ukraine has made it clear that it is ready to engage constructively in the ceasefire-related talks, however, no broader peace deal would be possible without serious security guarantees and the resolution of the existing territorial dispute with Russia.

Trump's Trump Cards

During the White House visit Trump pressed Zelenskyy that he holds no cards. However, a fundamental question is “What are Trump's trump cards?”

The first of such a card would be his personal interest in ending the war and a high political stake for his administration, after having campaigned on it. The personal engagement of U.S. presidents in intractable conflicts has often resulted in peace deals. Teddy Roosevelt and the Russian-Japanese Treaty of Portsmouth, Woodrow Wilson and the Fourteen Points, Jimmy Carter and the Camp David Accords, Bill Clinton and the Dayton and Good Friday agreements all come to mind. Even Trump's personal engagement in the Middle East and the 2020 Abraham Accords are a good testament to what a U.S. president's full engagement in conflict resolution could do. This, however, comes with a downside. Oftentimes, personal engagement carries political costs, and the desire to make quick deals prevails over the contents of the agreement, which is a major fear for Ukrainians.

A second trump card is Trump's change of stance towards Moscow, treating it as an equal and sidelining Ukraine in bilateral talks with the Russians. Before the Munich discussions, Trump [called](#) Vladimir Putin and only later [informed](#) Zelenskyy about their conversation. The Kremlin's official readout [emphasized](#) Putin's insistence on addressing the “root causes” of the conflict, a phrase that, in the context of Russia's demand for Ukraine's “denazification,” effectively signified a refusal to negotiate with Zelenskyy and a strong preference for engaging directly with the United States. The U.S.-Russian Ministerial meeting in Riyadh also showed that Trump gave preferential treatment to Russia – a psychological and PR victory for ostracized Putin. It is no coincidence that we have hitherto not seen the pressure on Moscow comparable to the pressure on Kyiv. Only sticks for Ukraine and carrots for Russia could be enough to bring the sides to the table; however, this strategy might fail once the parties become engaged in negotiations over territories, security guarantees and the wider international security order.

Trump's third trump card is the “expanding of pie”

for Moscow. On 18 February 2025, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Advisor Mike Waltz [led](#) the delegation to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for direct talks with Russian officials, including Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. These discussions, notably excluding Ukrainian and European representatives, focused on exploring economic and investment opportunities contingent upon ending the war in Ukraine. This attempt to “expand the pie” for Russia makes sense from the mediation perspective. Effectively, Washington is signaling to Moscow that if the peace deal is agreed with Ukraine, Russia could hope to solve other outstanding issues with the U.S. However, the major problem in this approach is that Russia’s “geopolitical wants” are dangerous and close to impossible to accommodate.

In June 2024, Putin outlined his vision of the “bigger pie.” Russia seeks to establish a new Eurasian security architecture, engaging all willing countries, including European and NATO states, in a system independent of U.S. influence. Moscow also insists that external military powers, primarily the U.S., should gradually withdraw from Eurasia, arguing that their presence only serves as an occupation rather than a real security need. Instead, Russia proposes strengthening multilateral Eurasian organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to promote regional stability.

Beyond security, Russia also envisions a new global economic order where Eurasian nations shift away from Western-controlled financial systems. Moscow accuses the West of undermining global stability through sanctions, trade wars, and the seizure of Russian assets, warning that such actions erode trust in Western financial institutions. Russia urges the expansion of alternative economic mechanisms, including settlements in national currencies, independent payment systems, and new trade corridors bypassing West-

ern-controlled networks. Additionally, Moscow supports the initiative of Belarus to draft a “Charter of Multipolarity” which would formalize a new international system to replace what it sees as the Western-centric global order. Through this vision, Russia positions itself as the core of a redefined Eurasian bloc, promoting security, economic independence, and regional cooperation as an alternative to Western dominance.

In short, any concessions on these Russian global ambitions could seriously undermine future international security and economic order. Whether or not Trump will accept this is not yet clear.

Trump’s fourth trump card is his insistence on engaging in Ukraine economically through securing a “dig, baby, dig” deal on Ukrainian minerals and rare earth elements. Considering that solid reserves of these minerals are in the occupied Ukrainian regions, the question of how these minerals will be extracted and utilized remains unanswered. Without a serious American presence on the ground (not just miners but their security protection as well), this deal will never work. Hence, the [hints](#) from the U.S. administration that the economic presence of the U.S. is a security guarantee in itself makes sense.

The fifth trump card is his readiness to retaliate against the possible deal-breakers and infringers of U.S. interests with full economic and diplomatic force. He has not spared his trading strategic partners (EU, Canada, Mexico), or Ukraine, when U.S. interests (as perceived by the new administration) were at stake. At least during his four-year term, if the cease-fire and peace deals are secured, it will be very risky for Russia to violate them without expecting serious retaliation from Washington. However, Putin is a master strategist of exploiting U.S. pre-election periods and power transitions. He can only be deterred with force and Trump has so far refrained from saber-rattling in Russia’s direction, except for the March 7 [tweet-](#)

[threat](#) to impose “large-scale Banking Sanctions, Sanctions, and Tariffs on Russia until a Cease Fire and FINAL SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT ON PEACE IS REACHED.”

Finally, the Trump team is willing to give up on some issues, which are sacred for Ukrainians and Europeans, and play hardball with Kyiv. During the February discussions in Brussels, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth [ruled out](#) two of Ukraine's most vital negotiating points, the restoration of earlier borders and NATO membership, removing them from the table as unrealistic objectives. The Trump administration's [decision](#) to suspend military aid to Ukraine and Zelenskyy's treatment at the White House showed that Trump can twist arms. Indeed, the ability to discard the essential demands of the parties (so far, only one party) as illegitimate could in theory help a mediator achieve a deal; however, there is a thin line between successful brinkmanship and failed negotiations. At the same time, pressing only Kyiv can create an impression of impunity for Putin who hitherto holds an upper hand in the war.

The biggest downside of Trump's strategy so far is that he seems to prioritize temporary (even if a four-year-long) cease-fire over a permanent peace deal. This opens room for Putin to take a pause, grab whatever concessions he can, rearm, redesign propaganda machinery and reengage in military endeavor once Trump is gone.

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West is in a weaker position to counter Moscow's aggressive plans.

Europe's (Not So) Common Position

In the run-up to the Munich conference, the mainstream position of European leaders, as [communicated](#) by the German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, was based on the argument that compromising Ukraine's two most important red lines (territorial integrity and security guarantees) even before negotiations begin neither makes sense nor can lead to lasting solutions. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas was even more direct, [stating](#) that concessions to Russia have never worked and that any agreement imposed on Ukraine against its will and without European consent will be impossible to implement.

In the aftermath of the game-changing Trump-Zelenskyy meeting at the Oval Office, European leaders are compelled to assume a more prominent role in supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer [convened](#) the “Securing Our Future” summit in London, resulting in a four-point plan: (1) maintaining military aid to Ukraine while intensifying sanctions on Russia, (2) ensuring that any peace agreement fully respects Ukraine's sovereignty and security, (3) strengthening Ukraine's defensive capabilities post-settlement to prevent future aggression and (4) forming a “coalition of the willing” to uphold and enforce the terms of the agreement.

While Europe remains committed to these measures, European leaders also acknowledge that without U.S. backing, implementation would be difficult. The remaining fundamental question regarding the enforcement of the agreement includes: where will the personnel, logistics, and political commitment come from in order to sustain a peacekeeping force along a volatile frontline?

And what happens if those troops find themselves in combat on the ground?

In an attempt to address the most pressing issue of possible security guaranteed to Ukraine, French President Emmanuel Macron recently [proposed](#) leveraging Russia's frozen assets as a deterrent, suggesting their seizure should Russia violate any future peace agreements. Additionally, Finnish President Alexander Stubb [advocated](#) for Ukraine's de facto NATO membership, implying that any breach of a future truce by Russia could automatically expedite Ukraine's formal entry into the alliance. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni also [called](#) for giving Ukraine NATO Article 5 protection, without membership.

The shift in U.S. policy places a significant and immediate burden on European nations to support Ukraine against Russian aggression. European leaders are now compelled to assume a more prominent role in supporting Ukraine financially and militarily. However, internal EU divisions, particularly the anti-Ukrainian [stances](#) of Slovakia and Hungary, hinder consensus, making a unified European response impossible. Consequently, Europe may need to rely on a "coalition of the willing," a group of nations prepared to take collective action, which could limit the scope of Europe's strategic options and necessitate innovative approaches from its leaders.

At a crisis March 6 EU summit, European leaders [pledged](#) to significantly boost defense spending as fears grow that the United States is stepping back from its role as Europe's security guarantor. The EU endorsed a plan to mobilize EUR 800 billion (USD 860 billion) for defense with a proposal for EUR 150 billion in EU-backed loans to member states. Leaders, including France's Emmanuel Macron, emphasized the need for a stronger, sovereign European defense, while Germany also signaled a shift in its fiscal policies to accommodate military expansion. The EU also agreed that the

peace deal should respect the following principles:

- There can be no negotiations on Ukraine without Ukraine;
- There can be no negotiations that affect European security without Europe's involvement;
- Any truce or ceasefire can only take place as part of a process leading to a comprehensive peace agreement;
- Any peace agreement needs to be accompanied by robust and credible security guarantees for Ukraine that contribute to deterring future Russian aggression;
- Peace must respect Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Amid Trump's outreach to Russia, European leaders reaffirmed their support for Ukraine, pledging EUR 30.6 billion in 2025, of which EUR 12.5 billion will be from the Ukraine Facility and EUR 18.1 billion will be from the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration loan, paid for out of the windfall profits from Russian immobilized assets. Norway also pledged USD 7.8 billion for 2025 and several European nations, including Germany, are seriously considering providing additional military assistance to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Britain has drawn closer to the EU on defense matters with Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Emmanuel Macron [advocating](#) a one-month truce focused on air, sea, and energy infrastructure. They are working to bridge gaps between Trump and Zelenskyy while rallying support from 20 nations to back a broader peace deal.

What Could the Peace Deal Look Like?

The contours of a potential peace agreement in the Ukraine conflict reveal starkly divergent positions among the involved parties. Russia remains unwavering in its key demands, insisting

on Ukraine's demilitarization, neutral status, and political transformation. By requiring Ukraine to renounce NATO membership and severely limit its military capabilities, Moscow aims to ensure that Kyiv remains within its sphere of influence and unable to pose a military threat in the future. The demand for regime change remains a core objective, although not always explicitly stated, with the Kremlin signaling that any settlement would require leadership in Kyiv that is more accommodating to Russian interests.

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In direct contradiction to these terms, Ukraine's baseline conditions for peace remain the restoration of its territorial integrity and binding security guarantees to prevent future aggression. Kyiv has consistently emphasized that any agreement must include the complete withdrawal of Russian forces from occupied territories and legally enforceable protections, whether through NATO membership or alternative credible (not Budapest-like) security commitments.

Negotiations for a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine could logically revisit the March-April 2022 draft [agreements](#) as they represent the most detailed and structured diplomatic effort between the two nations since the war began. Despite its flaws and the fact that the treaty was never finalized, the documents offer a framework both sides engaged with at the time, making it a more realistic starting point for renewed talks than any proposal imposed from scratch. It is noteworthy that on 7 March, the Russian ambassador to the UK [suggested](#) that the new negotiations should be based on the April 2022 agreement.

The 2022 draft addressed core issues such as Ukraine's neutrality (with security guarantees), a scaled-down military, and limitations on alliances—terms that, while controversial, remain central to Russia's current demands. Given that both Kyiv and Moscow were involved in negotiating its terms, a modified version of this agreement could serve as a baseline for a new peace initiative, particularly if Western actors encourage a pragmatic compromise that ensures Ukraine's sovereignty while alleviating Russian security (albeit illegitimate) concerns.

However, any attempt to revive the April 2022 framework must acknowledge the fundamental changes on the battlefield and in international dynamics since then. Russia has gained further territories since April 2022 and the Ukrainian army is now occupying part of Kursk. Russia's continued insistence on Ukraine's disarmament and restrictions on its sovereignty remains a major stumbling block, making it essential that any modernized agreement includes firm international security guarantees for Kyiv. Moreover, Moscow's demand for territorial concessions remains highly problematic, but negotiations could explore transitional arrangements for contested regions under international oversight instead of legitimizing annexation. Negotiations could also leave the status of these territories "outside of the brackets," "agreeing to disagree" on them. If framed within a broader European security framework, with mechanisms ensuring Ukraine's defense capacity, a revised version of the 2022 document could provide a pathway toward ending the war while preventing further Russian aggression.

There would be, however, several major differences from the April 2022 negotiations.

The first major difference will be about the on-the-ground security guarantees in the form European peacekeeping force and the so-called American [backstop](#). Russia would need to agree to such

presence and it is unlikely that Ukraine would agree to anything without the international boots on the ground. The mandate and umbrella for such a mission would also be a point of disagreement, since Russia would only agree to an international mandate which it can veto at any time (UN Security Council or the OSCE). In contrast, Ukraine would favor bilateral commitments from the European nations.

U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth [suggests](#) that if foreign troops were to be deployed as peacekeepers in Ukraine, they should be part of a non-NATO mission, explicitly stating that they should not be covered under NATO's Article 5 security guarantees. Additionally, he emphasized that any such deployment must include robust international oversight of the line of contact. Russia has consistently viewed the deployment of NATO member state forces in Ukraine as a critical red line, perceiving it as a direct violation of its December 2021 ultimatums.

The second difference is the declared U.S. economic interest—particularly access to Ukraine's rare earth elements and minerals. The effective operationalization of these interests must include a heavy American presence in Ukraine, including in the now-occupied regions. Whether or not Russia would allow this remains an open question.

The third major difference is about the territories. Unlike February 2022, when Russia was on the retreat after having failed to capture Kyiv, it has been on the offensive since 2023, having annexed parts of Ukraine's eastern regions and incorporating them into Russian territory. How Moscow will return these territories, politically or legally, remains a serious unanswered question. In addition, Ukraine now controls part of the Kursk region, the first time since World War II that a foreign power has occupied Russia's territory. Clearly, Kyiv would love to exchange the territory; however, Moscow

will likely insist on the full withdrawal of Ukrainian troops without preconditions.

The fourth major stumbling block will be elections in Ukraine. Unlike 2022, when Zelenskyy was holding an undisputed mandate, Putin now disputes his legitimacy, arguing that he cannot sign anything with a president whose term has expired. Trump has also started [pressuring](#) Zelenskyy to hold elections, officially citing concerns over democratic legitimacy. Meanwhile, in September 2022 after Russia illegally annexed four regions of Ukraine — Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia — Zelenskyy enacted a decree declaring that holding negotiations with Putin had become impossible. This decree would need to be rescinded to engage in peace talks, which can only happen if Russia compromises on annexing the four regions, creating a catch-22 situation.

Fifth, it remains unclear how the issue of Ukraine's territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders would be agreed. The EU position can be traced back to the draft UN resolution [A/ES-11/L.7](#), which firmly supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. American, or rather, Trump's position, is not yet clear. The UN Security Council [resolution](#) that the U.S. (and Georgia) sponsored was only about the cessation of hostilities, omitting Ukraine's territorial integrity, for the first time in UN documents.

These stumbling blocks could stimulate the U.S. to push only for a temporary cease-fire, effectively freezing the conflict and stopping the bloodshed. This in turn could lead to a prolonged stalemate that Russia can exploit in the medium-to-long run. Such an outcome would overlook the necessity for a new and stable European security. The decisions made now, particularly regarding security guarantees, will define the next era of stability for Europe, shaping the future role of NATO, the U.S., and the EU.

Implications for Georgia

The implications of the Ukraine-related negotiations for Georgia are huge. And bleak, too. Georgia is currently one of the most vulnerable countries in Europe. Like Ukraine, it has occupied territories and has long faced Russian hybrid warfare.

The implications of the Ukraine-related negotiations for Georgia are huge. And bleak, too. Georgia is currently one of the most vulnerable countries in Europe. Like Ukraine, it has occupied territories and has long faced Russian hybrid warfare. However, unlike Ukraine, Georgia is a battlefield state without an active war—Russia has already achieved its objectives not through direct military aggression but by successfully exploiting the Georgian Dream regime to align with its interests. This posture has effectively sidelined Georgia from discussions about regional security, creating a dangerous precedent where political subjugation replaces military occupation as a tool for asserting Russian influence even in a vastly pro-Western society.

The Georgian Dream and Bidzina Ivanishvili have deliberately distanced Georgia from critical international security discussions, banking on Russian success in Ukraine. One of the most lucid examples is that Georgian officials were not invited to the Munich Security Conference or any high-level gathering in Brussels on Ukrainian or security-related matters. As the fate of Russia's so-called "near abroad" is being decided, Georgia is entirely absent from the table.

This creates a lose-lose situation for Georgia's national interests. If Ukraine manages to secure a deal that guarantees its security and independence and paves the way for its European integra-

tion, it is highly likely that Georgia will remain in Russia's shadow and will not be part of the West-Ukraine-Russian arrangements. If, on the other hand, Ukraine has to swallow a bad deal, effectively legitimizing Russia's military and political gains, the Georgian situation will be completely hopeless as it will be a bonus prize for Moscow after having "won" Ukraine on the battlefield and in diplomatic talks.

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In such a situation (that is, in any scenario), Georgia's sovereignty is at risk for the first time since regaining its independence. The shortsighted strategy of the Georgian Dream to alienate all friends and befriend an aggressor is likely to backfire and very soon prove counterproductive and hazardous for the country's independence and sovereignty.

Countering this threat to Georgia's sovereignty is challenging, given Georgian Dream's positioning. However, the West must still continue supporting pro-democracy forces, increasing pressure on the pro-Russian regime, and keeping the European integration aspirations of Georgian society high on the agenda. The EU and the U.S. must stand firmly on the side of democracy, back new elections, and ensure that Georgia's occupied regions and Georgia's right to choose European Union and NATO over Russia, remain a key issue in talks with Russia. Yielding Georgia to Moscow's influence or accepting it as part of Russia's orbit would be a strategic and moral failure, bringing Russia closer to its objectives in Ukraine, the wider region, and beyond ■

ReArmed Europe: A Trump-Induced Strategic Awakening

“**T**here are decades when nothing happens and there are weeks when decades happen,” a phrase attributed to Vladimir Lenin, has come to the minds of many since Donald Trump retook possession of the Oval Office.

Transatlantic relations have often been punctuated by moments of disagreement and internal tensions between Europeans and Americans.

Transatlantic relations have often been punctuated by moments of disagreement and internal tensions between Europeans and Americans such as the Iraq war (2003), the unilateral U.S. decision to withdraw from Afghanistan (2020), or the incessant debates on burden sharing within NATO. But these decisions had no direct impact on Europe's security.

But today, just several weeks into the Trump 2.0 presidency, and for the first time since World War II, the Western camp is fractured at the heart of its *raison d'être* – the transatlantic defense alliance. This divide seems all the more serious as it is accompanied by the Trump administration's attacks on the Old Continent, both on the economic (a declared war on customs barriers) and the ideological (the crux of JD Vance's speech in Munich) fronts.

Unintended Architect of European Defense

Some Ukrainians, with a touch of irony and malice, argue that Vladimir Putin—through his aggression, invasion, and outright denial of Ukraine's sovereignty—has unintentionally done more than anyone to forge and solidify the Ukrainian nation. While any comparison between Donald Trump and



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Putin would be entirely misplaced when it comes to European defense, Trump's abrasive and disruptive stance on the transatlantic alliance may well become a turning point. Whether he intends it or not, Trump could end up being remembered as an unwitting architect of Europe's defense awakening.

Trump's behavior leaves Europeans with no excuse not to make a swift and brutal readjustment. Europe needs to find a rapid but lasting solution to two existential challenges. The immediate objective is to help Ukraine more and better in order to compensate for the loss of the American ally. A more fundamental objective is to organize an integrated defense of European countries, including defense industries.

Preventing Ukraine's capitulation is the key to ensuring that Putin does not extend his war to another European country in the near future.

Preventing Ukraine's capitulation is the key to ensuring that Putin does not extend his war to another European country in the near future. The foundation of a common European defense must be laid—not necessarily within the EU framework, as waiting for the approval of Budapest and Bratislava at this stage would be futile and counterproductive—but through a coalition that actively includes the British, Norwegians, and ideally the Turks who command NATO's second-largest army in terms of personnel and armored vehicles. Crucially, this new alliance must not be formed without Ukraine, which deserves a central role given the strength and battle-hardened experience of its military, as well as Kyiv's growing defense industry.

To this day, it is difficult to know what will become of the transatlantic alliance. What form will NATO take? Relative optimists, including the British and Italian governments, want to believe that one could be moving towards a NATO 3.0 with an increased role for Europeans and the progressive

disappearance of the Americans, who will nevertheless remain in the background to ensure a certain number of functions, given their supremacy in intelligence, air surveillance control or even nuclear power.

The more pessimistic outlook, championed by Macron and Merz in particular, suggests "facing reality" and accepting the end of 80 years of American security guarantees. This implies that Europe must prepare to defend itself independently while any continued or future U.S. support would be an unexpected bonus rather than a false hope that wastes precious time. Regardless of the scenario, Europe must reinvent and rebuild its defense, securing financial, human, and technological resources on a scale far beyond what currently exists.

Europe, Still Alive and Kicking

After an initial state of paralysis, European leaders launched an unprecedented diplomatic offensive: multiple mini-summits in Paris and London, high-profile visits to Washington, a Kyiv summit gathering leaders from 13 European nations, and a European Council meeting in Brussels—all within just ten days. While uncertainties remain, the broad contours of a European response to the two major strategic challenges are beginning to take shape. Discussions in Paris and London have centered on the potential deployment of a European force to help stabilize Ukraine. Some countries, such as Italy and Spain, remain hesitant, particularly in the absence of American logistical and intelligence support. However, a core coalition is already forming with France, the UK, and the Scandinavian nations at the forefront, likely joined by others. Türkiye's participation could significantly bolster this effort as Ankara views the evolving European security landscape as a strategic opportunity. In total, up to 20 countries are reportedly willing to contribute to a "coalition of the willing" aimed at securing a ceasefire in Ukraine.

The March 6 European Council in Brussels may go down in history as the moment Europe decisively rallied around Ukraine and embraced a bold vision for its own defense. In a landmark move, European leaders [endorsed](#) the “Re-Arm Europe” initiative, aimed at forging a stronger and more sovereign European defense posture. All EU member states backed European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s plan to mobilize EUR 800 billion for defense spending. The plan includes relaxed fiscal rules to accommodate higher budget deficits and a EUR 150 billion package of EU-backed market loans for member states.

Adding to the significance of the summit, French President Emmanuel Macron [proposed](#) discussions on extending France’s nuclear deterrent to European partners—an idea once considered unthinkable but now gaining traction amid growing security concerns. The urgency of these measures has been amplified by Donald Trump’s decision to [suspend](#) all military assistance to Ukraine and his repeated remarks casting doubt on U.S. commitments to defend NATO allies in the event of an attack.

London and Rome are working to minimize the damage and salvage what remains of transatlantic relations, at least holding back Washington until Europe can stand on its own. However, there is consensus that the U.S. is no longer a reliable ally.

This article focuses on how each of the G4 European states is responding to Trump’s challenge. Poland, whose commitment to Ukraine is unquestionable and which had already raised its defense spending to 4.7% of its GDP even before the Oval Office confrontation between Trump and Zelenskyy, is not included due to the paper’s limited scope. The same applies to the unwavering support for Ukraine and European defense efforts by Denmark, Sweden, Estonia, and Lithuania, whose contributions must not be overlooked or undervalued.

France’s “Told You!” Moment

France reacted with less panic than others to America’s declarations, having long anticipated the possibility of Europe standing alone without its transatlantic ally. Strategic autonomy has always been a cornerstone of French defense thinking, rooted in a deep-seated mistrust of U.S. hegemony (the De Gaulle-Mitterrand doctrine) and a fierce commitment to national sovereignty, exemplified by its independent nuclear deterrent.

While recent French presidents (Hollande and Macron) leaned more Atlanticist, they never abandoned the vision of a strategically autonomous Europe. The real obstacle was European reluctance—Germany and Central and Eastern European states preferred NATO’s umbrella and U.S. military backing over what they saw as redundant French ambitions. Macron’s 2017 Sorbonne [speech](#) and his 2019 [warning](#) about NATO’s “brain death” were largely ignored.

Now, as Trump’s policies shake Europe’s security architecture, Macron is doubling down on his vision. The UK partnership, [formalized](#) in the Lancaster House accords (2010), remains solid, and echoes of the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration, which aimed at a European military force, are resurfacing. With Germany under Merz showing newfound openness to Gaullist ideas, France seizes the moment—offering to extend its nuclear deterrent, and, perhaps, lead Europe’s defense on its own terms.

Macron appears to have moved past his earlier attempts to “tame” Putin—a strategy that defined the first years of his presidency. Determined to succeed where others (Bush, Merkel, Hollande, Obama) had struggled, he sought a grand compromise with Moscow. His final disillusionment came in February 2022 when his diplomatic overtures failed to prevent Russia’s full-scale invasion

of Ukraine. Putin's blatant lies, coupled with relentless hybrid attacks on French interests, ultimately convinced Macron that Russia was not just an unreliable partner, but an imperialist threat to France and Europe.

In his impassioned March 5 address to the French nation, Macron left no room for ambiguity: Russia has turned its war on Ukraine into a global conflict.

In his impassioned March 5 [address](#) to the French nation, Macron left no room for ambiguity: Russia has turned its war on Ukraine into a global conflict. Calling for national resilience, he framed Moscow as a direct threat and urged France to step up, both militarily and strategically. He floated the idea of the French nuclear deterrent to protect Europe and vowed to revitalize France's defense industry—signaling a decisive shift from diplomacy to deterrence.

Global Britain Back to Port Europe

When Boris Johnson championed Brexit, he promised Britain a geopolitical reset—unshackled from Brussels and free to expand its global influence. Yet, even as Brexiteers sought new horizons, they placed unwavering faith in the “special relationship” with the United States. This partnership, reinforced by the Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA), remains critical to the UK's nuclear deterrent, ensuring access to nuclear materials, technology, and intelligence—despite London's independent operational control over Trident.

But the “special relationship” had already dimmed from its Churchill-Roosevelt, Macmillan-Kennedy, and Thatcher-Reagan heyday. With Trump 2.0, it now hangs by a thread. Nowhere is the rift more visible than in Ukraine: a “beautiful ocean” separates Washington and London on the Russian

threat. For the first time in recent history, nearly all of Britain's political establishment—except Nigel Farage's Reform Party—stands firmly against the White House's stance on Ukraine, alongside a British public still committed to Kyiv's defense.

Kier Starmer, the UK's Labour Prime Minister, has grasped the gravity of this “once-in-a-generation moment for European security.” His response has been twofold: doubling down on military aid to Ukraine while forging closer ties with European allies. The London mini-summit, convened swiftly after the Trump-Zelenskyy clash, underscored this realignment. However, unlike Macron and Merz, Starmer refuses to concede that America is lost. He recognizes that, in the short term, Europe alone may struggle to sustain Ukraine's defense. That is why he is deploying all his diplomatic skills to prevent an abrupt American retreat, particularly in critical areas such as Air Surveillance Control and intelligence sharing.

Should his efforts fail, Starmer might emerge not as the bridge to Washington, but as one of Europe's most determined leaders, embracing the continent's defense as a British priority.

Today, under vastly different circumstances and with a shifting transatlantic landscape, history's currents seem once again to be steering Britannia back toward its natural European harbor.

Decades ago, in his famous West Point [speech](#), U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson remarked, “Great Britain has lost an Empire and has not yet found a role.” At the time, he urged London to join the European Economic Community (EEC), arguing it offered greater strategic advantages than the Commonwealth or even the “special relationship” with the U.S.. The remark offended Prime Minister Macmillan and much of the British press, yet by 1973, the UK joined the EEC. Today, under vastly

different circumstances and with a shifting transatlantic landscape, history's currents seem once again to be steering Britannia back toward its natural European harbor.

Can Germany's Budgetary "Grand Bazooka" Save Europe?

"Money doesn't matter anymore!" [declared](#) *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 4 March - a striking headline from a country where fiscal orthodoxy has long been a near-religious doctrine. For almost a century, Germany's economic policy has been shaped by the trauma of post-World War I hyperinflation, instilling a nearly sacred commitment to balanced budgets. This ethos extended across Europe, setting the tone for the entire eurozone—though not all member states adhered to it as devoutly.

Now, faced with the urgency of rearmament, Germany is breaking with its sacrosanct constitutional rule of budgetary discipline. Even before finalizing the coalition agreement—a meticulous process that could take weeks—Friedrich Merz reached a landmark deal with the Social Democrats to nearly double the military budget, raising it to EUR 100 billion annually, pushing defense spending toward 3% of the GDP. Commentators have already [dubbed](#) this unprecedented shift a "budgetary grand bazooka."

With Russia looming and the U.S. wavering, Germany is embracing extraordinary measures, echoing Mario Draghi's famous "whatever it takes" approach from the 2008 financial crisis. Merz himself made the parallel explicit: "In light of the threats to freedom and peace, we must apply the same principle to defense—'whatever it takes,'" he [declared](#) on 4 March 2025.

Germany now faces a triple intellectual revolution. First, it must overcome its deep-seated aversion to militarism, a postwar cultural taboo. Second, it must confront its long-standing opposition to both

civil and military nuclear power—public opinion may resist, but with German industry struggling to replace cheap Russian gas while ramping up production of Leopards, Taurus missiles, and other advanced weaponry, nuclear energy is becoming an unavoidable debate. In the military sphere, Merz suggests that Germany should rely on an extended French and British nuclear umbrella rather than pursuing its own nuclear capability.

Finally, Germany must remove the constitutional and psychological barriers that prevent it from taking on debt. This would require a two-thirds majority in both the Bundestag and Bundesrat—an extraordinary political feat, but one that could be achieved by the end of March 2025. If so, it would mark the most dramatic economic policy shift in modern German history, proving that in times of existential threat, even Germany's deepest dogmas can be rewritten.

Merz, a staunch Atlanticist, has already undergone this triple transformation in his thinking. Coming from the historically transatlantic CDU, having spent his entire career in a Germany that once hosted the largest contingent of American troops—around 200,000 during the Cold War and 35,000 today—he has long been steeped in the belief that security was NATO's responsibility. Yet, on the very night of his election victory, before the final results were even confirmed, Merz [made](#) a striking declaration: "It is clear that this (American) government doesn't care much about Europe's fate... My absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that we can achieve independence from the USA."

Germany, after years of stagnation and mild recession, has no intention of limiting its transformation to defense spending alone.

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to defense spending alone. Berlin is [also launching](#) an ambitious EUR 500 billion plan over the next decade to modernize its aging infrastructure. The link to defense may seem indirect, but in reality, it is designed to stimulate economic growth and, in time, generate the resources necessary to sustain a stronger security posture. Crucially, Merz's vision aligns perfectly with Emmanuel Macron's ambitions for a robust Franco-German axis—one that never quite materialized under Merkel and deteriorated further under Scholz.

Italy and Meloni's Delicate Balancing Act

Italy has long been one of Europe's most steadfast Atlanticist nations, maintaining a close security relationship with the United States since 1945. Even when Matteo Salvini's *Lega Nord* and the populist *Five Star Movement*—both sympathetic to Moscow—briefly shared power, the country's transatlantic orientation remained unchanged. Since taking office in October 2022, Giorgia Meloni has worked to solidify her standing on the European stage, offering rare government stability while France and Germany struggled with internal upheavals. By strongly backing Ukraine, toning down her EU skepticism, and positioning herself as a hardliner on illegal immigration, Meloni earned credibility among European leaders. With Trump's return to power, the stars seemed perfectly aligned—she was the only sitting European head of government invited to his inauguration and boasted strong ties with his inner circle, including Elon Musk. But the recent course of American politics has thrown Meloni off balance.

Since JD Vance's provocative speech in Munich and Trump's increasingly aggressive rhetoric—threatening to withdraw from European defense, normalize ties with Moscow, and pressure Ukraine into a minerals deal—Meloni's carefully crafted political calculus has unraveled. Unlike Merz and

Macron, who are openly moving toward European strategic autonomy, she has been working to keep bridges intact, positioning herself as a stabilizing force between Washington and European allies. To this end, she has proposed a transatlantic summit in Rome to defuse tensions. Keen to maintain ties with the U.S. while avoiding alienation from Kyiv and her European partners, Meloni has reportedly advised Ukraine to adopt a more conciliatory stance and has allegedly been discreetly deleting past pro-Zelenskyy tweets. Despite this, her Defense Minister, Guido Crosetto, publicly [backed](#) Ursula von der Leyen's initiative to boost European rearmament.

Meloni is acutely aware of the emerging geopolitical realignment: France, Germany, Poland, the Nordic and Baltic states, and soon the UK are coalescing around a new European defense axis, preparing for a future without American guarantees. Meanwhile, Hungary and Slovakia—historically pro-Moscow—are now fully aligned with Trump's Washington. Ideologically closer to the latter camp, Italy is nonetheless more deeply integrated into the former, leaving Meloni caught in a delicate balancing act.

No matter how Meloni maneuvers, Italy is bracing for a Europe that may soon have to stand on its own.

Despite these dilemmas, Italy is forging ahead with plans to increase its defense spending from the current 1.5% to 2.5% of its GDP by 2027. And behind the scenes, Rome is preparing for even more drastic measures. On 28 February, *Corriere della Sera* [revealed](#) the existence of a secret contingency plan to rapidly convert Italy's automotive industry into a military production powerhouse should the need arise—further proof that, no matter how Meloni maneuvers, Italy is bracing for a Europe that may soon have to stand on its own.

European Defense for Ukraine, by Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has become both the crucible and the betrayal of European defense—a baptism in blood without a godfather to fulfill his duty. As outlined earlier, Ukraine's survival is Europe's immediate imperative. Its 900,000 soldiers are the ones holding back Russia's military, led by a Kremlin bent on avenging its Cold War defeat. This thirst for revenge is all the more dangerous given that the United States appears increasingly tempted by the idea of striking a deal with Russia at any cost—even if it means abandoning Ukraine and dismantling the transatlantic alliance into a patchwork of transactional arrangements.

Europe's security, sovereignty, and prosperity now rest on Ukraine's ability to withstand the onslaught, and on the collective resolve of European nations to support it—militarily, financially, and diplomatically. Beyond the battlefield, Ukraine's success must translate into a lasting peace that ensures its sovereignty, deters future Russian aggression, and prevents another war, whether against Ukraine or any European state. That imperative is already shaping European policy, with aid commitments doubling—not only at the EU level but also through national efforts from the UK, Norway, and other key allies.

The ultimate ambition for Europe has always been to build a robust and independent defense system—one with fully integrated armies, command structures, and even a unified arms industry, free from reliance on the United States. Today, Ukraine stands as one of the most formidable military forces on the continent. For more than three years, its army has held off a numerically and logistically superior Russian force, carrying out successful counteroffensives and even striking within Russian territory and seizing parts of the Kursk Oblast.

European defense without Ukraine is now unthinkable.

Through the crucible of war, Ukraine has not only strengthened its military but also cultivated a defense industry capable of large-scale production, technological innovation, and battlefield-tested advancements. Such a nation cannot be sidelined in Europe's future security framework. Ukraine must be at its core. Europeans should push for its NATO accession, and if political roadblocks—whether from Hungary, Slovakia, or even the United States—make that impossible, then alternative integration mechanisms must be devised. European defense without Ukraine is now unthinkable.

And Georgia?

If Türkiye becomes part of the emerging European defense structure, Georgia's chances of inclusion will increase significantly.

When Georgia eventually has a government free from Russian influence, it should seize the opportunity to integrate into Europe's defense architecture. The country holds strategic assets that make it a valuable security partner: its geographic proximity to adversaries like Russia and Iran, its vital role as a transit corridor for energy (gas, oil, electricity), goods, and digital infrastructure, and its small but battle-hardened military, which has proven its commitment in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, Georgia ranked second only to the United States in troop contributions relative to its population. If Türkiye becomes part of the emerging European defense structure, Georgia's chances of inclusion will increase significantly.

Trump's foreign policy is rooted in a starkly different understanding of power. While past administrations—whether neoconservative or liberal—

saw force as an instrument tied to broader values and legal principles, Trump's approach seems to champion raw power for its own sake. In this worldview, order itself becomes the highest value, unburdened by moral constraints, law, or traditional alliances. NATO, the longest-standing defensive alliance in history, is dismissed as a costly inconvenience. Trump prefers fleeting transactional arrangements, where relationships shift based on immediate self-interest rather than long-term commitments.

This explains his treatment of allies—disregarding them much as he disregards inconvenient truths. JD Vance, for example, falsely claimed that NATO allies have not fought for decades, ignoring the sacrifices of British, French, and other European troops in allied operations. Worse still, on 6 March, 2025, Trump [suggested](#) that NATO's Article 5 obligations were conditional on payments, adding: "Do you think France would come to help us if we were attacked? I'm not sure." In response, the French President [reminded](#) the world that NATO's only invocation of Article 5 followed the 9/11 attacks, leading European forces into Afghanistan in solidarity with the United States.

Where does Georgia fit into this worldview? Despite its steadfast military support for Washing-

ton in Iraq and Afghanistan, the reality is that it likely means little to Trump. Seeking *connivance* with his administration might be possible, but such relationships are fleeting and unreliable. For a small country like Georgia, the only viable path is to build lasting alliances.

This brings to mind an anecdote from the Obama years. In November 2011, Georgia hosted a North Atlantic Council (NAC) visit, bringing NATO's 28 permanent representatives and its Secretary-General to Tbilisi and Batumi. On a government-chartered plane flying from Tbilisi to Batumi, I found myself seated next to a senior European diplomat. In casual conversation, I lamented that Georgia was not a priority for the Obama administration. His reply, half-joking but striking in hindsight, has stayed with me: "*Consider it good news—he's not interested in Europe either. That means he already sees you as a European state. Use that as an argument to get Europeans to support your EU and NATO aspirations.*"

Today, as Europe embarks on its own defense awakening, Georgia must once again make its case—this time, not just as a future NATO and EU member, but as an essential player in European security ■

The World Order That Was Not Ordered

By the end of 2024, the world had celebrated the New Year, and Donald Trump had celebrated his second coming as President of the United States of America. All celebrations surely included a toast to a better 2025 and hopes for prosperity, tranquility, and peace. It would be perfectly normal if any of the celebrants had their own version of “prosperity,” “tranquility,” “peace,” and their way of understanding how to achieve it. What most celebrants got fundamentally wrong was the assumption that all their plans would materialize in an already existing world order.

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It looks like Donald Trump's agenda, both domestically and internationally, aims at a fundamental

reshuffle, or if you may, dismantling of the existing order. In 2024, he miraculously dodged an assassin's bullet, but America's domestic bureaucracy could not dodge the DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency). The international order, in turn, could not dodge Donald Trump and his revisionist agenda.

The new (old) American president has been in office for only a month, yet domestic and international earthquakes are already shattering nearly every single pillar of “order,” “system,” or “institutions.” And we are not even in the aftershocks phase yet.

Political and business leaders, pundits, bureaucrats, and ordinary people worldwide are trying to guess what his agenda really stands for. It appears that the majority of the world's intellectual populace is keeping a misty index finger up, trying to catch the direction of the new wind and navigate accordingly.



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America's domestic turbulence merits a separate analysis and it might be easier to decode the new administration's actions in that context. Regarding international affairs, the fundamental shock stems from the fear that America is abandoning its more than 200-year-old fundamental principles, policy priorities, and the Pax Americana in general. Even though the tsunami of changes is sweeping and fast-developing, one can only speculate about its causes, the vision behind it, and the reasoning of its architects. One phrase often heard from members of the new American administration is:

"The world has changed and we shall adapt to it." So, what has changed and how does the current American leadership perceive the changing world?

New Realities

The slogan "Make America Great Again" already implies something is seriously wrong with America. Domestically, these "wrongs" are well articulated: woke/DEI/identity policies, uncontrolled immigration, overblown bureaucracy, inflation, and unemployment. The fact is that skillfully address-

ing these “wrongs” effectively propelled Donald Trump to his second-term presidency.

Internationally, the declared “wrongs” also have names, such as fixation on climate change, unfair trade policies detrimental to American interests, uncontrolled international aid (including military assistance), the tendency of allies to take American security guarantees for granted, and a growing disrespect for America—even from its allies.

It appears that the lenses through which high-level American decision-makers and opinion leaders view the world paint a very grim picture. Let us take a closer look at some pieces of that picture.

The Institutions

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was initially envisaged as a predominantly Russian foreign policy tool for challenging Western dominance on the international stage. However, it has now become a highly Sino-centric organization, significantly increasing the number of its members and observers beyond its original five.

The same can be said about BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) which has attracted countries traditionally considered more or less Western allies such as Türkiye and the UAE. Furthermore, within BRICS, ideas of challenging the dominance of the U.S. dollar in international trade are actively circulating.

The WTO has become an arena where the U.S. is challenged by China over allegedly unfair tariff policies.

The Bretton Woods institutions—the World Bank, IMF, and the WTO—were created right after the catastrophic World War II and used to be major pillars of international economic development. Not anymore. While they are still active, the BRICS

New Development Bank and China’s Belt and Road Initiative now offer viable alternatives for infrastructural development. The WTO has become an arena where the U.S. is challenged by China over allegedly unfair tariff policies.

Global Business Practices

During the Cold War, an alternative to Western support required at least nominal adherence to socialist and communist ideas—often sufficed by the presence of prefixes such as “socialist” or “people’s” in a country’s name and the monopolization of the state economy. Today, China offers partnerships and investments without ideological caveats or regard for the recipient’s performance on democracy and human rights. Not bound by anti-corruption regulatory restraints, Chinese companies happily offer bribes for preferential treatment by local officials. Chinese companies largely disregard ecological considerations and labor rights laws. With minimal bureaucratic procedures, Chinese state-sponsored credits are readily available for investment or development. These practices significantly shorten project initiation-to-implementation timelines, producing quick and visible results.

All of the above puts Western companies at a disadvantage. Western firms are strictly monitored by their respective governments and subject to extensive compliance regulations and independent climate, anti-corruption, and labor rights watchdogs. The best business practices adhered to domestically in the West have become nearly untransferable to the developing world, even if Western technologies are superior or Chinese business practices eventually negatively affect local populations.

Trade

Trade wars between China and the U.S. are neither surprising nor new. However, China is now effec-

tively encroaching on the U.S. market, not only with t-shirts and sneakers but also with strategic materials critical to the U.S.—materials that are no longer produced domestically, thereby increasing America's dependence on Chinese suppliers. Traditional U.S. markets like Europe are flooded with more affordable Chinese alternatives, including machinery, automotive products, and consumer goods. The same applies to cheaper solar panels, telecommunications goods, etc. When it comes to financial tools, Visa, Mastercard, and American Express are no longer the exclusive players in the credit/debit card market, now challenged by China's UnionPay. The list goes on, contributing to a worrisome trade deficit for the U.S..

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Nowadays, practically everyone knows about the impact of artificial intelligence on economic development. If the two major engines for AI are big data and its processing capabilities (powerful computer chips), China clearly has an advantage in both. With a population of 1.4 billion and unrestricted access to private data from its citizens and global companies, China enjoys an unmatched advantage in collecting big data and testing AI models. We can add to this the so-called “mined data” from Chinese social media platforms (TikTok), trade platforms (AliExpress), telecom companies (Huawei), and hacking of governmental or major business databases.

Such a reality undoubtedly positions China as a major competitor. Trump's every other hectic (and often bizarre) step on the international stage can be considered against the backdrop of such a perception or assumption. If so, a number of vital questions arise concerning world order—questions that require analysis and discussion.

Ukraine Under the Wing or the Bus?

Departing from the foreign policy agenda of a predecessor is not a new phenomenon in America. However, in this particular case, worried voices speculate whether the world is experiencing a fundamental shift in America's role—from traditionally siding with the oppressed against evil empires and axes of power to legitimizing the actions of evildoers by calling it the “new normal” and justifying it as “striving for peace.” Ukraine has become a litmus test for such shifting policies.

The Trump administration not only changed its rhetoric but also echoed false Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine.

The promise of ending the war between Ukraine and Russia was a constant theme in Trump's pre-electoral speeches and concrete actions followed immediately after his inauguration. The pace, methodology, and manner of these actions left domestic and external observers puzzled and worried. The Trump administration not only changed its rhetoric but also echoed false Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine.

This shift in rhetoric was followed by concrete actions, raising not only eyebrows but also the question: Is the U.S. really throwing Ukraine under the bus? Pressure on the Ukrainian leadership to sign a vague “minerals deal” without any security guarantees serves as merely the first step in a fundamental change of approach toward this horrific war by the U.S.. The unprecedented berating of President Zelensky in a White House meeting by President Trump and Vice President Vance, although shocking, was a logical outcome of this changing attitude. The recently announced [pause](#) in military assistance to Ukraine and [suspension](#) of intelligence cooperation reinforce speculation

that the U.S. is planning to achieve its desired results largely at the expense of Ukrainian interests. The U.S. leadership is making it very clear what is expected from Ukraine—take our offer, even if you do not like it, or show us a new President who will take our offer.

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Without U.S. political, economic, or military support, it will be extremely difficult for Ukraine to withstand Russian pressure. However, this situation is not unprecedented. Last year, due to a deadlock in Congress, support for Ukraine was halted and delayed for a full six months. Yes, Ukraine has seen some retreats, notably in the city of Bakhmut, but such delays did not result in the collapse of the front line. Yes, today's Ukraine has fewer soldiers to fight and the war is deeply unpopular after three years of continuous fighting. Nevertheless, European allies appear to be taking the looming danger of Ukraine's military defeat—and its possible consequences for Europe—far more seriously in the face of shifting American priorities. The most recent European summit on Ukraine's situation has already resulted in a "coalition of the willing" which, at a minimum, can provide financial support and boost Ukrainian defense.

Ukrainians, meanwhile, after experiencing prolonged disruptions in arms and ammunition supplies, have rapidly developed their own military industry, ranging from the domestic production of improved small arms to various aerial, terrestrial, and naval drones, armored and armed vehicles. While still not sufficient in quantity to fully replace U.S. supplies, particularly for air defense, this development is enough to continue fighting in a more technologically advanced manner. Notably,

according to a recent [report](#) from the reputable defense think tank RUSI, "tactical UAVs currently account for 60–70% of damaged and destroyed Russian systems." The same applies to personnel losses in the Russian army. Various [reports](#) indicate that Ukraine currently produces between one and two million drones per year, meaning that the disruption of U.S. military supplies will not necessarily result in an immediate cessation of hostilities.

This development translates into a race-against-time scenario where it is unclear whether or not America's changing attitude will expedite peace or prove fundamentally problematic for the Trump administration.

Is Russia Up for Grabs?

The sudden change of heart toward the war in Ukraine and U.S. foreign policies in general, demands some rational explanation.

Today's Russia is clearly a significantly weakened country. Myths of the "second army in the world" have been shattered by fierce Ukrainian resistance and the unparalleled losses of lives and equipment suffered by the Russian army.

Today's Russia is clearly a significantly weakened country. Myths of the "second army in the world" have been shattered by fierce Ukrainian resistance and the unparalleled losses of lives and equipment suffered by the Russian army. The spillover effects of the war have extended beyond Ukraine's borders with critical infrastructure facilities—such as oil refineries deep within Russian territory—becoming legitimate targets for Ukrainian drones. Heavily sanctioned and politically isolated, Russia has lost its lucrative Western (mostly European) markets and diverted its hydrocarbon trade to the

east, mainly to China and India, under significantly discounted purchase agreements.

This shift in trade has pushed Russia further into China's orbit, making China its dominant trading partner. However, the so-called "partnership" is merely a soundbite; in reality, Russia's dependence on China has drastically increased over the past three years. Without Chinese electronic components and consumer products, Russia's ability to produce more advanced weaponry than Soviet-era designs would be severely limited. In return, Russia has become little more than a raw-material appendage to China. This growing dependence and the further rapprochement between China and Russia could pose serious challenges for the Western world, especially the U.S..

Under these circumstances, one can hypothetically consider the possibility of a special deal between the U.S. and Russia—one that convinces Russia to turn back to the West, secure its own version of a "minerals deal," and provide more American access to Russia's wealth in exchange for lifting political and economic sanctions as well as re-opening America for Russian oligarchs to invest or vacation. Naturally, for such a "restart" of relations, the war in Ukraine would need to end as soon as possible with details of a possible ceasefire appearing negligible in the pursuit of greater strategic goals.

Signs supporting this scenario have begun to emerge. The Trump administration's new policies emphasize changing rhetoric toward Russia—manifesting almost daily, but most significantly in the recent [UN resolution](#) on Ukraine and the G7 meeting [communiqué](#), which avoided calling Russia an aggressor. The Russian leadership has [declared](#) its interest in a minerals deal with the U.S. and President Putin has [instructed](#) a designated state-owned bank to collaborate with Elon Musk, among other developments.

Crisis of Alliances?

JD Vance's scandalous speech at the Munich Security Conference clearly stated that the current U.S. leadership does not see today's Europe as an ally when it comes to fundamental values. In Vance's (and presumably others') opinion, Europe is infected with the same "diseases" that the American administration is fighting—namely, "woke/DEI/identity policies, uncontrolled immigration, and overblown bureaucracy." If European leaders endorse these "diseases," they are no longer considered allies. Vance's comments that Europeans do not even have battle-proven forces to support Ukraine were quickly labeled as "disrespectful" by British and French politicians. All signs suggest that the current American administration no longer considers Europeans valuable or capable allies.

Canada and Mexico—America's two closest (and only) immediate neighbors—share the same fate. They have found themselves in renewed economic conflict with their major trading partner due to freshly imposed (and for now suspended) 25% tariffs on exported goods.

One might assume that American allies in the Middle East would avoid confrontation with these new policies, but the proposal to resettle Gaza's population and build a "Riviera" there is at odds with the Arab leaders' alternative plan for reconstruction, backed by USD 53 billion in pledged funds. It is also hard to imagine that Türkiye would be either excited about or supportive of the "Riviera Gaza" project.

If China is the designated or real foe, the value of trusted alliances should increase, not diminish.

These realities leave little optimism—if any—about the sustainability of the world order which was

considered a given merely months ago. If China is the designated or real foe, the value of trusted alliances should increase, not diminish. Unfortunately, we observe the opposite, and history suggests that such scenarios have grim outcomes. The growing sentiment of replacing “God Save America” with “God Save Us From America” cannot bode well for world peace, even if attempts are made to justify it through fears of rising challenges

from China. If “America First” means resuscitating Russia in the name of Chinese threats and putting “Kremlin First”, the European and, for that matter, global security order, as we know it might collapse. As Benjamin Franklin famously said after signing the Declaration of Independence: “We must all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately” ■

The EU's Strategic Pit Stop: Need to Change Gears and Put on Hard Tires

As the world braces itself, awaiting the outcome of the Ukrainian-Russian-American-European peace talks (or attempts), the Georgian Dream government continues to build an autocratic regime, adopting totalitarian non-democratic laws and firmly placing itself among the Autocracy Inc., to [quote](#) Anne Applebaum.

The European Union watches these developments from a reactive stance. Each political maneuver by the ruling party catches Brussels off guard, leading either to delayed responses or, in some cases, to no response at all. The statement by Irakli Kobakhidze on 28 November 2024, effectively halting Georgia's EU accession process, was an unexpected shock for many in Brussels and key EU capitals. The European Union had miscalculated in granting Georgia candidate status "on credit," expecting to incentivize the Georgian Dream to realign with the

European path. However, that expectation proved unfounded. Instead, EU-Georgia relations have deteriorated to an all-time low.

Despite its extensive global agenda and an overload of its plate, the EU must not lose sight of Georgia and its people who have been protesting continuously for over three months.

For those who believe that the ruling party has already hit rock bottom and cannot do further damage, a reassessment is necessary. The Georgian Dream still has multiple avenues through which it can deepen the crisis. Despite its extensive global agenda and full plate, the EU must not lose sight of Georgia and its people who have been protesting continuously for over three months. The EU also needs to prepare for the worst-case scenarios.



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Just as a Formula One car must switch from soft to hard tires when the asphalt heats up, the EU must toughen its stance as Georgia's political landscape intensifies. Adapting to harsher conditions is the only way to maintain control and stay ahead of the curve.

Unsustainable Status Quo

By suspending the EU accession process until 2028, the Georgian Dream has freed itself from the scrutiny and pressure associated with reform implementation. While this move has sparked sustained mass protests—the longest-running demonstrations in the country's history—the ruling party appears determined to endure and suppress dissent. Repression has intensified, with authorities resorting to intimidation tactics against protest participants in an effort to quash public opposition. Simultaneously, the Georgian Dream has ramped up its disinfor-

mation campaigns, seeking to erode public support for EU accession, undermine the credibility of the European Union leadership, and smear the opposition parties and civil society groups.

If the fate of Ukraine is negotiated between Washington and Moscow without Kyiv or the EU's direct involvement, the Georgian Dream will undoubtedly use this as justification for its pivot away from the EU.

The Georgian Dream's euro-skeptic position will be further strengthened if Ukraine and Moldova stumble on their EU path, something which could be expected. Additionally, if the fate of Ukraine is negotiated between Washington and Moscow without Kyiv or the EU's direct involvement, the Georgian Dream will undoubtedly use this as justifica-

tion for its pivot away from the EU. So far, Georgian Dream leaders have been using every statement by the Trump administration for their own political gains. Attacks on [USAID](#), the humiliation of Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office and the [narrative](#) of Ukraine wanting to continue war have been transformed into domestic propaganda messages.

AA Under Threat?

Georgia's democratic backsliding has put the EU-Georgia [Association Agreement](#) (AA) in jeopardy with the European Parliament now calling for a comprehensive audit of EU-Georgia relations. The [resolution](#), which urges the European Commission to review the agreement, underscores a grim reality: Georgia's government is openly violating the core principles of democracy, rule of law, and human rights enshrined in the agreement. Article 2 of the AA makes it clear that these values are not optional but fundamental to the partnership between Georgia and the EU. Yet, the Georgian Dream has systematically eroded judicial independence, politicized law enforcement, attacked media freedom, and undermined anti-corruption institutions—all in direct breach of the commitments it made to the EU member states.

These violations are not abstract. They are clear, measurable, and deliberate. Article 4 of the AA obligates Georgia to develop and strengthen democratic institutions, guarantee judicial independence, and uphold the rule of law. Instead, the government has tightened its grip on the judiciary, ensuring that politically loyal judges dominate the system. The so-called "Clan of Judges" continues to exert unchecked control, manipulating court rulings in favor of the ruling elite. The judicial appointment process remains opaque and politically driven, making a mockery of Georgia's pledge to ensure transparency and impartiality in its legal system. Law enforcement, rather than being a pillar of stability, has become a political weapon—used to harass opposition figures, intim-

idate journalists, and silence government critics.

The Georgian Dream's attacks on civil society and the independent media are an even more blatant violation of its European commitments. Article 13 of the AA explicitly obligates Georgia to promote human rights, media freedom, and access to justice. Yet, the past few months have seen an unprecedented assault on independent journalism. Passing the [new laws](#) regulating media freedom for broadcasters and even attempting to regulate online speech, as [announced](#) on 4 March, would further undermine the implementation of AA obligations.

Civil society organizations have also become targets. The government's push for a "foreign agent" law, modeled after Russia's notorious legislation, labeled NGOs as enemies of the state. The newly announced and tabled U.S.-type FARA (Foreign Agents' Registration Act) will make it impossible for CSOs to continue functioning. This move will be a direct violation of Article 13 which guarantees freedom of association and civic engagement. The message from Georgian Dream is clear: those who challenge its grip on power—whether journalists, activists, or independent institutions—will face pressure, persecution, or prosecution.

The fight against corruption, once a hallmark of Georgia's European path, has also collapsed under the Georgian Dream. Article 4 of the AA commits Georgia to strengthening its anti-corruption institutions and ensuring their independence. Yet, rather than tackling corruption at the highest levels, the government has transformed the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) into a political tool, using it to investigate NGOs and media outlets while ignoring rampant graft within the ruling elite. There is no serious effort to increase transparency in public procurement, political party financing, or government accountability—all of which were key reforms Georgia pledged to undertake. The ACB will likely be tasked with implementing new FARA legislation, equipping it with more punitive tools.

The broader question that the EU should try to ask is whether or not the Georgian Dream is actively preparing to dismantle Georgia's European integration framework altogether. While the Association Agreement is legally binding, Article 427 allows for its denunciation by either party. If the government intends to fully disengage from the EU, withdrawing from the agreement would be its next logical step. The first warning signs have already appeared. In January 2025, Georgia [announced](#) its withdrawal from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) after the body called for fresh elections. The move was eerily reminiscent of Russia's [decision](#) to quit the Council of Europe in March 2022, just before fully embracing autocracy and cutting ties with European institutions.

If these trends continue, Georgia risks becoming the first Eastern Partnership country to willingly abandon its EU aspirations. The consequences would be severe, not just for Georgia's democratic future, but for its economic stability, regional security, and geopolitical standing. The European Parliament's recent resolution may be a warning shot but, unless the EU moves beyond rhetoric and begins enforcing the consequences of these violations, the Association Agreement will become a meaningless document—and Georgia's European path will fade into history.

Could Georgia Follow Iceland's Path?

In November 2024 when Irakli Kobakhidze announced that Georgia would merely “postpone” accession talks, it was clear that this was more than a tactical delay. It was the first major step toward deliberately disengaging from the EU enlargement process. The Georgian Dream could still formally withdraw the country's EU membership application altogether if it deems it necessary for internal political reasons.

This scenario is not without precedent. In 2015, Iceland became the first country to unilaterally [withdraw](#) its EU membership application due to a combination of political, economic, and sovereignty-related factors. By 2015, Iceland's economy had recovered with its GDP returning to pre-crisis levels, thereby reducing the urgency of joining the EU and so the application was dropped. In Iceland, this decision was a calculated, pragmatic step based on its economic recovery, concerns over sovereignty, and a lack of public urgency. In Georgia, however, this could happen for totally different reasons - political hostility from the ruling party, economic realignment with Russia, and growing authoritarian tendencies.

Unlike Iceland, which maintained close economic and political ties with the EU despite halting accession, Georgia's potential disengagement could result in a complete rupture with European institutions. The Georgian Dream has increasingly framed the EU as a hostile force, attacking EU diplomats, assaulting civil society, and undermining democratic institutions—moves that signal not just a pause but a potential reversal of Georgia's European path. While Iceland chose to step away from EU membership because it no longer saw a compelling economic reason to join, Georgia's government appears to be deliberately severing ties for political survival, fearing that continued alignment with Brussels would limit its authoritarian consolidation.

The key lesson from Iceland's case is that once a government politically commits to reversing EU integration, it can do so unilaterally, regardless of public sentiment. In Iceland, the decision was made without a referendum or full parliamentary approval, despite demands for a national vote. Georgia risks following the same trajectory—except in its case, the consequences would be far more severe. The question is no longer whether or not the Georgian Dream wants to remain on the EU path—it is if the Georgian public and opposition forces can resist its retreat before irreversible damage is done.

To justify such a drastic move, the Georgian Dream could attempt to shift blame onto Brussels, pointing to the lack of progress for Ukraine and Moldova as evidence that EU membership was never a realistic prospect. Some Icelandic politicians used a similar argument in 2015, claiming that negotiations were stalled indefinitely and that there was no point in remaining in the queue. If Moldova and Ukraine continue to struggle with their accession timelines, the Georgian Dream may find it easier to convince its supporters that the EU was never serious about integrating the country in the first place.

The EU cannot afford to be passive in the face of this looming deterioration. It must increase its scrutiny of Georgia's democratic trajectory, making it clear that withdrawal from the accession process would not simply be a political maneuver but a catastrophic decision with real consequences.

The EU cannot afford to be passive in the face of this looming deterioration. It must increase its scrutiny of Georgia's democratic trajectory, making it clear that withdrawal from the accession process would not simply be a political maneuver but a catastrophic decision with real consequences. Expanding the EU Rule of Law Report to include Georgia could be one way to keep pressure on the government. The visa suspension mechanism, another tool at the EU's disposal, could also serve as leverage. If the Georgian Dream believes that it can quietly walk away from the European project while continuing to enjoy the economic and travel benefits of EU cooperation, Brussels must prove otherwise.

No Economic Anchor Either

Economic arguments that once made Georgia's EU alignment seem inevitable are now losing their weight. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade

Area (DCFTA), a central pillar of the Association Agreement, was once hailed as a game-changer for Georgia's economy, offering businesses privileged access to the world's largest single market. Yet, over the past decade, this promise has been steadily eroding and the numbers tell a clear story. In 2015, Georgia's [exports](#) to the EU accounted for 28.3% of total trade. By 2024, that figure had [collapsed](#) to just 8.7%.

The decline in exports is not just a temporary economic fluctuation—it is a reflection of a deliberate political and economic realignment. Georgian businesses, once enthusiastic about the EU's market opportunities, now find themselves facing trade barriers, shifting regulatory requirements, and political uncertainty. At the same time, economic actors closely aligned with the ruling Georgian Dream party have cultivated deeper financial and commercial ties with Russia and China, reducing their reliance on Europe. As a result, the once-powerful business sector, a key advocate for EU integration, has become noticeably silent. The private sector, which previously saw EU trade as a ticket to modernization and economic stability, now appears resigned to Georgia's pivot toward alternative markets.

Meanwhile, Russian and Chinese investments have [surged](#), providing the Georgian government with a new source of financial and political leverage. While Chinese infrastructure projects and Russian energy investments come with fewer conditions than EU assistance, they also create long-term economic dependencies that could prove costly for Georgia's sovereignty. In particular, Chinese loans for large-scale infrastructure projects—often issued without stringent transparency requirements—have already led to concerns about debt diplomacy. At the same time, Russian capital has been flowing into Georgia at an unprecedented rate, especially since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The [influx](#) of Russian businesses and individuals fleeing sanctions has brought an economic boost to certain sectors but at a geopolitical cost: Georgia is increasingly seen

as a safe haven for Russian money, further straining relations with the West.

With fewer economic incentives to remain closely aligned with Brussels, Georgia may feel emboldened to continue drifting away from the EU. If European markets no longer serve as Georgia's primary trading destination and alternative funding sources from China and Russia continue to expand, the government could argue that the EU is no longer an economic necessity. This would not only provide justification for political disengagement but would also further neutralize the business sector as a force for pro-European advocacy.

The EU must recognize that its economic leverage over Georgia is diminishing. The benefits of visa-free travel and DCFTA access are no longer enough to counterbalance the increasingly attractive offers from China and Russia.

The EU must recognize that its economic leverage over Georgia is diminishing. The benefits of visa-free travel and DCFTA access are no longer enough to counterbalance the increasingly attractive offers from China and Russia. To counter this trend, Brussels needs to rethink its economic engagement strategy, offering stronger investment guarantees, trade incentives, and tangible economic benefits that keep Georgia anchored in the European orbit. Without a renewed push to deepen economic ties, the EU may find itself losing not just Georgia's government but also its business community and economic elite.

Forthcoming Diplomatic Freeze Out?

Another avenue for the deterioration of Georgian Dream-EU relations could be the frontal attack against the EU diplomatic missions and its dele-

gation in Georgia. Georgia's diplomatic retreat is already evident. The Georgian Dream has left ambassadorial posts vacant in 11 out of 27 EU member states as well as in the U.S., and the UK, weakening engagement with key Western partners. At the same time, the ruling party is vilifying European diplomats, including the ambassadors of the [EU](#) and [Germany](#), accusing them of political interference and questioning their very presence in Georgia. The next logical step would be expelling EU diplomats, a tactic used by Russia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan to eliminate international scrutiny. The Georgian Dream has already [hinted](#) at invoking Article 9 of the Vienna Convention, which would allow it to declare European diplomats persona non grata, further isolating Georgia from Brussels.

The Georgian Dream is also tightening its grip on civil society, a crucial counterbalance to its growing authoritarianism. The closure of USAID and NED operations has already dealt a severe financial blow to independent NGOs and the Georgian Dream is now [establishing](#) a state-controlled funding agency to channel Western grants exclusively to pro-government organizations (GONGOs). This mirrors Azerbaijan's crackdown in 2014 when the Aliyev regime [forced](#) all foreign-funded NGOs to register with the state, leading to mass closures. Russia and Belarus followed similar paths, using "foreign agent" laws to criminalize independent civil society.

The European Union has recognized this threat and [promised](#) to redirect EUR 120 million in funding from the Georgian government to civil society organizations. However, months later, this promise remains unfulfilled, allowing the Georgian Dream to continue with its financial suffocation strategy. If the EU fails to act swiftly, it risks repeating the mistakes made in Azerbaijan and Belarus where Western donors were eventually forced out entirely. It cannot be overruled that the ruling party will pass the laws, forbidding uncoordinated funding of the CSOS by the foreign embassies. In such a case (and this could happen soon), the EU and the Euro-

pean embassies have to make a swift decision – do they play by the new undemocratic laws or do they look for alternative, including clandestine funding mechanisms.

Time to Shift Gears

Irakli Kobakhidze's announcement on 28 November 2024 was not the final blow to EU-Georgia relations—far from it. The Georgian Dream still has multiple levers at its disposal to further deteriorate ties. Despite its packed foreign policy agenda, the EU must not turn its back on Georgia. The Georgian people overwhelmingly support European integration, and abandoning them would only embolden the ruling party's authoritarian drift.

There will be a need to react and the results cannot be ignored. Brussels has to figure out what type of immediate response it will have.

The Georgian Dream has not finished making Georgia an authoritarian state. The work is still in progress. The ruling party [announced](#) the adoption of a new package of legislation that would put yet another nail in the coffin of democracy. Once adopted, there will be a need to react and the results cannot be ignored. Brussels has to figure out what type of immediate response it will have. The moves the EU has made so far have not been able to stop the Georgian Dream from pursuing its way of building autocracy. It is time for the EU to move from reactive to proactive. Developing a comprehensive strategy, assessing risks, and preparing counter-measures will allow Brussels to shape events rather than merely respond to them. A strategic recalibration is long overdue ■

As USAID Dies, Many of Georgia's "Vibrant" CSOs Face Extinction

The demise of the U.S. aid agency is a boon for the ongoing oligarchic coup. The decision of Donald Trump's administration to suspend the operations of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) caused 55 thousand confirmed job losses, and an estimated 100 thousand job losses globally, according to [preliminary data](#). In Georgia, the news could not have come at a worse time. The rapidly autocratizing Georgian Dream regime has been squeezing civil society groups through repressive legislation, disinformation and personal bullying. Georgian Dream PM Irakli Kobakhidze jubilantly [called](#) the closure a "black day" for Georgia's "radical opposition," adding that the decision would "contribute to the stable development of the country." For years, the Georgian Dream has [accused](#) USAID-funded programs of fomenting a coup on behalf of the opposition. Shalva Papuashvili, Speaker of the Georgian Dream rump parliament, [accused](#) USAID of "having undue influence on Georgia's domestic politics" undermining the friendship between Georgia and the U.S..

Extent of the Damage

For decades, Georgia has been one of the largest per capita recipients of U.S. assistance. In 2012-2023, the years in which the Georgian Dream has been in power, total U.S. overseas development assistance (ODA) stands at USD 1 billion 920 million, according to [official data](#). Of course, the lion's share of that assistance went to the government and public administration.

In 2023, the U.S. government disbursed USD 143.8 million in aid to Georgia, with USD 84.5 million flowing through USAID as the primary administrative channel. USD 77 million of that was allocated to governance-related programs, but where did all that money go? Once again, most of the assistance went to the government and public administration. To give a representative example in 2023, the last fiscal year when complete data is available, the largest share, at USD 42 million, was spent under "conflict, peace, and security" umbrella, while USD 34 million fell under "government and civil



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society.” Of this amount, USD 15 million supported democratic participation and civil society, USD 6.5 million went toward legal and judicial development, and USD 3.5 million was directed at media and freedom of information. Human rights programs received USD 2.1 million, while decentralization efforts got USD 600,000. Meanwhile, USD 470,000 was allocated to domestic revenue mobilization and USD 450,000 was used to combat transnational organized crime.

To put this into perspective, the annual administrative cost of running the aid programs in 2023 (USD 18 million) was actually higher than the entire budget narrowly allocated for strengthening democratic participation and civil society in Georgia (USD 15 million).

All but one of the USAID programs in 2023-2024 in the field of governance were administered through U.S. contractors, either U.S.-based CSOs like the Citizens Network for Foreign Affairs (CNFA) or corporations like Deloitte. Georgian CSOs are often consortium members (sub-grantees) or recipients of grant-making projects which usually form a part of a larger program. The distinguishing feature of most U.S. assistance programs was that they often treated non-governmental actors (CSOs, consultancies, etc.) as partners in implementing these projects rather than just direct beneficiaries of assistance, especially in recent decades. In other words, apart from supporting the development of local CSOs, regional media programs, or advocacy skills of CSOs, for example, they would actively engage the expertise of existing non-governmental entities to aid the reforms in programs where civil servants, ministries, or state agencies were the key beneficiaries. As a result, a cohort of local professional organizations and individuals was formed through the years.

Our considered estimate is that over 2,000 Georgians are likely to lose jobs due to culling USAID, given the average number of programs, grants, and

sub-grants, and the average number of people required to implement them. Most of them are qualified (first and medium-level) project and program managers with foreign language skills as well as administrative personnel (e.g., financial officers), and other support professions (e.g., media managers).

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What Kind of Capacity?

The U.S. is not Georgia's largest ODA provider – the European Union is. In 2022 (latest available figure) the EU chipped in with USD 240 million while the U.S. contributed USD 115.5 million. However, the way this assistance is being targeted is not the same. The whole point of EU funding for countries like Georgia in the association process is to make their legislative and regulatory fields compatible with the EU body of laws. Hence, almost all the funding goes to the Georgian government and its various agencies. The share of direct government support is considerably larger than that of the U.S./USAID funding. An official EU Delegation [release](#) said its aid for the Georgian ministries in 2019-2024 surpassed that of CSOs by a factor of 11.

Crucially, the modality of assistance varies accordingly. Even when the government is the final recipient, as we mentioned, USAID programs often operate with or through national professional groups—CSOs, business consultancies, academia—to provide services such as technical or capacity-building assistance.

By contrast, the EU often favors government-to-government modality (like in its twinning projects where EU-member country ministries/

agencies share experience with associated or aspirant country counterparts) or provides “technical assistance” which often means engaging (mostly) European consultants, often ex-officials, almost always through European consulting firms. The EU’s assistance to CSOs is often part of larger regional calls for applications, or global programs, requiring collaboration among many CSOs in regions (for example, the EU Eastern Neighborhood) and/or EU member states. By design, these are less flexible and less targeted to local needs – which has been acknowledged by the EU’s [review](#) of external funding instruments. From the EU funding providers, the European Endowment of Democracy (EED), an autonomous trust fund established by the EU and its member states, comes closest to the USAID assistance modality for CSOs. Not surprisingly, the EED has also been a key target of the Georgian Dream government’s ire, even though its funding volume is considerably smaller than USAID’s.

In other words, USAID funding generated an incomparably larger footprint in Georgia’s CSO scene in terms of local organizational partners, individual national professionals, and beneficiaries.

An important distinguishing characteristic of the U.S. State Department and USAID-funded programs was their focus on good governance, which implied cooperation with civil society actors at every level. Combined with the mentioned modality of working extensively with local partners, this has nurtured a body of professional CSO organizations for decades.

In the mid- to late-1990s and early 2000s, when Georgia was widely considered a failed state, such professional organizations became a vehicle for training and retaining the qualified cadre inside the country. Thus, they formed a critical reservoir of capacity, providing services to state institutions (legal, advisory, training, translation) and citizens (humanitarian assistance, legal aid, continuous

education, language education, information, social services).

The institutionalized CSOs have functioned as a check on authoritarian tendencies in conditions when vertical and horizontal accountability were chronically deficient.

These organizations, in effect, have formed the “exoskeleton” of democratic governance, even when the state’s key functions lacked capacity. With the gradual recovery of the state institutions, many of the CSO trainees formed the core of the new civil service and also entered policymaking roles after 2023. But even as the state retained its capacity, the institutionalized CSOs have functioned as a check on authoritarian tendencies in conditions when vertical and horizontal accountability were chronically deficient (see more details on this in [earlier article](#)).

Georgian CSOs have long inconvenienced and [were targeted](#) by successive governments displaying authoritarian tendencies for playing this role. They were also criticized – sometimes correctly – for not having sufficient grassroots presence. Yet their “professionalization” has served its purpose of retaining the cadre that could serve as credible partners (and, if necessary, opponents) to government officials and international aid officials alike.

Ironically, having tirelessly defended themselves from recent efforts to limit the legal space for their operations and reduce their ability to solicit funds, many such organizations and cadres find their livelihoods upended by the U.S. government’s decision, which happens to coincide with the whims of homegrown tyrants.

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What Will Happen?

It is now becoming clear that the EU will not be able to promptly fill the gap left by the unexpected disappearance of USAID.

It is now becoming clear that the EU will not be able to promptly fill the gap left by the unexpected disappearance of USAID. Even though the Georgian Dream government's antidemocratic moves [cost Tbilisi](#) USD 130 million in EU assistance, and despite the [calls](#) of the EU parliament for a redirection of EU committed funds "to enhance the EU's support for Georgia's civil society; in particular, the non-governmental sector and the independent media," this money is unlikely to make it to Georgia. The interviews of the author with EC officials who preferred to keep their anonymity suggest that most of this sum was already reallocated to different countries in the EU's neighborhood and that the modality for disbursing the remaining amount was not yet decided upon, creating mounting risks in Georgia. This suggests that no EU decision on redirecting the remaining funds will come before the impact of USAID's withdrawal becomes irreversible.

Even as the protests keep going in the streets of Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party is pushing ever strongly ahead with entrenching repressive autocracy.

But, even if the funds were to become available in the coming months, they may never reach their destination. The Georgian Dream rump parliament is rubber-stamping laws to make foreign funding [all but inaccessible](#) to the established CSOs and the independent media. The campaign of the personal harassment of activists continues unabated. Even as the protests keep going in the streets of Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party is pushing ever strongly ahead with entrenching repressive autocracy. It now feels like it has the international winds in its sails.

Under these conditions, many of those previously employed in USAID programs and projects dealing with governance are preparing to turn this professional page, especially as they are often breadwinners in extended families.

A cursory survey conducted for this article revealed that when asked about their plans for 2025, most of the former junior staff consider taking up remote jobs with international companies for which they are overqualified – such as staffing customer service hotlines. Several mid-level managers with professional knowledge and with families are looking for scholarships and plan to continue their post-graduate studies abroad to "wait out" the deterioration. Some are looking forward to joining the academic community inside the country or to taking up hybrid consultancies with UN agencies or other development organizations abroad. These are some of Georgia's highly skilled professionals—key players in the country's development. Their exit fuels a growing brain drain, depleting local expertise and weakening governance.

Interestingly, based on this small survey, most would prefer to stay in Georgia, even those who have been personally threatened. In other words, even though the loss of institutional capacity is likely to be significant and permanent, active citizens prefer to wait out the worst at home, although in other sectors of the economy.

There is an important caveat that those organizations working on human rights protection and legal advice are determined to continue protecting their compatriots from the onslaught of arbitrary justice and police violence. Even facing considerable financial and mounting legal difficulties, on-line media outlets are also determined to continue fulfilling their function. Therein lies the cue for policy.

What Can EU Donors Do?

A discussion about any further steps from the EU or other donor agencies must start with an acknowledgement of the fact – apparent both in statements and in actions – that the Georgian Dream government has no intention on governing Georgia as a liberal democracy. This breaks the key assumptions of most aid programs and these need to be adjusted. Cramming the discordant reality into existing regulatory matrices will only lead to aberrations such as a European-funded UN agency holding a “gender mainstreaming boot camp” for ruling party representatives on the day when the same party MPs banned use of the word “gender” in official documents.

The donors must also recognize that the Georgian Dream is making tangible steps to create GONGOs (government-sponsored NGOs) that will be designed to create an impression of civil society engagement and divert foreign donor funds.

The donors must also recognize that the Georgian Dream is making [tangible steps](#) to create GONGOs (government-sponsored NGOs) that will be designed to create an impression of civil society engagement and divert foreign donor funds. In 2025 elections, such GONGOs – like the Khashuri Women Entrepreneur Union – were [already used](#) as fake observers to validate results.

To be adequate to the existing reality, donors must:

- Cancel all programs related to governance at least until new and democratic elections are held in a free and fair manner;
- Activate, without delay, the programs and instruments that are used for shielding the human rights activists in authoritarian states such as the Human Rights and Civil Society Program by EU/NDICI or the EU Foreign Policy Needs facility and the Rapid Response Pillar of NDICI;
- Use such channels to continue supporting – individually if necessary – legal aid clinics and similar in-country facilities that help the targets and victims of arbitrary justice and police violence;
- Recognize and explicitly adopt risk appetites for the fungibility of EU, UN, and other donor assistance targeting; e.g., local business development, humanitarian assistance and the like, which risk being diverted to GONGOs that infiltrate and manipulate processes in favor of the ruling party;
- Promptly establish facilities – preferably in the shape of a new trust fund or by using the EED – to support independent online media and journalists that still operate in Georgia. Further, there must be a plan for journalist relocation and remote work – using the Ukraine and Belarus models – in case of a major violent crackdown.

While these measures may not fully save Georgia's struggling NGO sector, they would at least keep the EU and donors ahead of the curve, enabling a swift and timely response to the country's worsening democratic decline ■

Abkhazia - An Overlooked European Shore

Abkhazia rarely makes headlines. It remains an afterthought in international security discussions, overshadowed by the war in Ukraine and broader geopolitical struggles between the West and Russia. Yet, it is a region that carries profound implications for Georgia, European security, and Russia's expansionist ambitions. The conflict over Abkhazia, like that in Ukraine, is a case study in how Russia destabilizes and dominates its periphery, using military force, economic control, and political manipulation to advance its influence. It is also a story of missed opportunities, irrational political decisions and the indecisiveness of the leaders on all sides of the dividing lines.

Since the early 1990s, Abkhazia has been at the center of a devastating conflict that resulted in the mass displacement of ethnic Georgians. Over 200,000 people—almost half of Abkhazia's pre-war population—were forcibly expelled in an act that meets the criteria of ethnic cleansing – recognized by the OSCE documents and UN resolutions. The

safe and dignified return of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees remains one of the most sensitive political issues in Georgia. Russia's de facto occupation of the region since the 2008 war has made it nearly impossible for the displaced to reclaim their homes, deepening the region's frozen conflict. Furthermore, Russia's dominance in Abkhazia has brought the region under total control of Moscow, raising suspicions that Russia is getting ready to annex it at the time of earliest convenience.

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Abkhazia's strategic significance extends beyond Georgia's borders. The Black Sea basin has become a critical zone of competition between Russia and the West. Abkhazia is one of the territories where Moscow has entrenched its military presence, including a naval base. Russian military bases, intelligence operations, and creeping annexation efforts have effectively turned Abkhazia into a military outpost for the Kremlin. This directly affects NATO's security in the Black Sea and the European Union's broader efforts to stabilize its eastern neighborhood.

Abkhazia's unresolved status has also directly impacted Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. The EU and NATO have hesitated to advance Georgia's membership due to fears that the unresolved territorial conflicts would complicate security guarantees and legal commitments. In effect, Russia has managed to "lock" Georgia's European aspirations through its control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This is precisely the strategy Moscow at-

tempted and is still attempting in Ukraine with Donetsk, Luhansk, Crimea, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia—using territorial disputes to prevent European integration.

Ignoring Abkhazia comes with a cost. The same tactics Russia perfected in Georgia—military occupation, hybrid warfare, economic manipulation, and political subjugation—are now being applied on a much larger scale in Ukraine. Had the West taken Russia's actions in Abkhazia more seriously in 2008, or before, the world might have been better prepared to counter Moscow's aggression in 2014 and 2022.

Elections Under the Russian Shadow

The recent de facto presidential elections (first round on February 15, second round on March 1) in Abkhazia showcased Moscow's continued domi-

nance over the region. Badra Gunba, the Kremlin's preferred candidate, [secured](#) 55% of the vote in the second round, defeating opposition leader Adgur Ardzinba. While the election was nominally a contest between local political factions, in reality, it was yet another demonstration of Russia's ability to dictate political outcomes in Abkhazia.

Gunba's victory was ensured through a combination of Russian financial backing, administrative pressure, and direct media influence. The Russian government first [cut](#) the financial aid and electricity supply to Abkhazia and then reinstated them in the final weeks of the campaign—a clear signal that voting for the Kremlin's candidate came with tangible economic benefits. Russian political strategists also played an active role in shaping Gunba's campaign, ensuring his messaging aligned with Moscow's strategic priorities. Russia [opened](#) the Sokhumi airport and launched the first direct flight from Moscow, which incidentally carried Mr. Gunba and a few Abkhaz students studying in Russia on board of the first "historic" Moscow-Sokhumi flight.

However, the election process was not without local anti-Russian resistance. Abkhaz society has demonstrated its ability to push back against Russian economic encroachment. Mass protests in November 2024 [forced](#) previous leader Aslan Bzhania to abandon key Russian-backed economic agreements such as the controversial investment deal that would have allowed Russian citizens to buy property in Abkhazia. Mr. Bzhania [had to resign](#) and pave the way for the early elections which were scheduled for 2025 anyway. These protests reflected a growing undercurrent of dissatisfaction with Russia's control, even among those who are not necessarily pro-Georgian. In fact, strangely, most ardent Abkhaz nationalists, who fought and even committed crimes to get Abkhazia's independence from Georgia, have now become situational allies of Georgia in their quest not to see Abkhazia annexed by Russia. After all, they fought

for the independence and if Russia annuls it (as it did with the regions of Ukraine), their efforts would have been in vain.

Neither Georgia, nor the West (including the EU), are actors in domestic Abkhaz politics, leaving the Abkhaz at the mercy of the Kremlin and giving a carte blanche to Moscow to toy with the local politicians at its whim.

Despite the sporadic societal pushbacks, Abkhazia's political process remains firmly under Moscow's control. Both candidates campaigned on being pro-Russian, both strived for attention and meetings with Moscow, both spoke the Russian language and held Russian citizenship, and both candidates considered Abkhazia to be indebted to Russia for recognizing their independence. Moreover, the major pillars of Russian presence and domination – security assistance, military bases, border control, investments, and budgetary support – were unchallenged during the campaign. Not that any candidate had a choice. When anti-Russian sentiments were heard from some opposition figures, Russia swiftly [stripped](#) two prominent local figures of their Russian citizenship, effectively locking them in Abkhazia.

Neither Georgia, nor the West (including the EU), are actors in domestic Abkhaz politics, leaving the Abkhaz at the mercy of the Kremlin and giving a carte blanche to Moscow to toy with the local politicians at its whim. The West and Georgia are generally demonized, and most politicians are often incentivized to stir anti-Georgian rhetoric to feed on the patriotic sentiments of ordinary Abkhaz who often find themselves engulfed in Russian disinformation and a propaganda bubble.

But the 2025 elections offered another interesting lesson, too. Even Georgians, who have their problems with elections and state capture by the oli-

garch, need to acknowledge that there is a certain degree of peculiar popular democracy in Abkhazia where power has changed hands several times in the last two decades through elections and popular unrest. The previous leader, Aslan Bzhania, was ousted in November 2024 as a result of pressure from the public over the agreements pushed by Russia. Bzhania himself came to power in 2020 when a public uprising [ousted](#) his predecessor – Raul Khajimba in 2019. Khajimba in turn was elected in 2014 after a coup earlier in 2014 [overthrew](#) his predecessor Alexander Ankvab. Yes, Abkhaz elections are often criticized as having many irregularities, including vote-buying and the use of administrative resources. Yes, ethnic Georgians in the Gali region (constituting at least a quarter of the total population) are not allowed to vote and those who have been massively expelled since the 1990s are unable to return. Yes, there are no international observers, except for Russia-paid Moscow-centric European lower-grade politicians. But still, whatever elections are held, they still more or less represent the will of the Abkhazia residents, albeit with the heavy Russian involvement in the process.

The Abkhaz have watched cautiously and with disdain how the “independence” of eastern Ukrainian regions – the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) evaporated with a simple signature of Mr. Putin.

The major lesson is clear: while Abkhaz society retains a degree of agency, Moscow still holds the levers of power. Whenever its political influence is threatened, Russia intervenes—whether through financial pressure, political manipulation, or media campaigns. It has not yet used force but if the need arises, especially once/when the issue of Abkhaz annexation becomes part of Moscow’s agenda, nothing can be overruled. The Abkhaz have watched cautiously and with disdain how the

“independence” of eastern Ukrainian regions – the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) evaporated with a simple signature of Mr. Putin.

Abkhazia’s “Lottery” of Recognition: A Prize of Russian Control

In 2008, Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia was framed as a significant diplomatic victory for the breakaway region. After a five-day war which Russia waged against Georgia, preceded by a series of steps aimed at legitimizing the Abkhaz authorities in response to Kosovo’s recognition by the West, Moscow recognized Abkhazia’s independence on 26 August 2008. Initially, Russia tried to increase the number of recognitions through political allies, petty bribing of third world leaders, and diplomatic pressure but it succeeded only with Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. However, Georgia’s non-recognition counter-strategy with the support of the Western partners reversed the recognitions of [Vanuatu](#) and [Tuvalu](#) and prevented other African, Latin American and Oceania countries from pursuing the Russian agenda. Only Syria’s Assad regime [recognized](#) Abkhazia and with the new government in Damascus, even that hangs by a thread.

The question is, what has Abkhazia truly won since that recognition in 2008? If before, the European leaders, like Javier Solana, then the High Representative of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy and Walter Steinmeier, then Germany’s Foreign Minister, visited Abkhazia and the level of engagement from the Western leaders was high, now the contacts are minimal and Abkhazia has completely disappeared from the Western agenda. In reality, Abkhazia’s independence recognition came with a price – complete economic and political dependence on Moscow.

For the past 17 years, Abkhazia’s so-called inde-

pendence has been an illusion, well sold by the local political elites, but in reality, it has made Abkhazia more susceptible to being swallowed by Russia. Russia currently fully controls its borders, its military, and its economy. The region's budget is almost 80% subsidized by Russian financial aid. Russian military bases and FSB officers oversee security, limiting Abkhazia's ability to act autonomously, including on "border" crossing.

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Russia's gradual digesting of Abkhazia has unfolded in carefully orchestrated stages, each reinforcing Moscow's grip on the region's economy, security, and political institutions. The turning point came in 2014 when Russia's annexation of Crimea signaled a more aggressive approach to consolidating its control over occupied territories. That same year, the Kremlin pushed through the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership with Abkhazia, [forcing](#) its de facto authorities to accept deeper integration into Russian legal and security structures. Despite public resistance, including opposition from the de facto parliament and civil society, Russia used financial blackmail to impose the agreement. It marked a significant step toward annexation, cementing Russian dominance over Abkhazia's defense and customs infrastructure.

Russia's encroachment became even more explicit with the de facto [annexation](#) of Aibga, a small village in Abkhazia's Gagra district. Moscow unilaterally added Aibga to its cadastral register in 2009, triggering protests from Sokhumi which insisted that the village remained within Abkhaz borders. Despite political pushback and public opposition, Russia formally incorporated Aibga into Krasnodar's jurisdiction in 2021. The annexation exposed

the power imbalance between Moscow and Sokhumi—Abkhazia's leaders could object but they were powerless to stop Russia from redrawing the map.

Beyond territorial expansion, Moscow has aggressively pursued economic and legal harmonization, further binding Abkhazia to its economy and legal space. The 2020 Program for the Formation of a Single Socio-Economic Space [mandated](#) that Abkhazia align its laws with Russian legislation in nearly every sector. The agreement dictated changes to citizenship laws, customs regulations, and even NGO operations, ensuring that Abkhazia would function as an extension of Russia's legal system. While the de facto authorities initially resisted allowing Russian citizens to buy land, Moscow continued to [pressure](#) Sokhumi to open the real estate market, a move that would dramatically shift the demographic balance in favor of the Russians. So far, the Abkhaz have been resisting this change but now with the election of Moscow's favorite as the de facto president, it is expected that the pressure to allow Russian investments in the real estate sector, including the purchase of property, will dramatically increase.

Perhaps the most blatant act of Russian appropriation was the seizure of the Bichvinta (Pitsunda) residence. The dacha, a former Soviet government retreat on prime coastal land, had long been under informal Russian control but in 2022, Moscow [moved](#) to formalize its ownership. The de facto parliament resisted ratifying the agreement, fearing a public backlash, but Russia escalated its pressure. Eventually, Abkhaz lawmakers were forced to ratify the deal under duress, despite mass protests and clear public opposition.

Energy dependence has been another crucial tool of control. Abkhazia relies on Georgia's Enguri hydroelectric plant for electricity but its growing demand, uncontrolled crypto-mining and lack of infrastructure have created a crisis. Russia has exploited this situation to push for the privatization

of Abkhazia's energy sector, ensuring that Russian companies would take over critical infrastructure. When the de facto government tried to resist, Moscow used financial blackmail, demanding that Sokhumi pay nearly USD 10 million for Russian electricity imports—an amount Abkhazia could barely afford. The ultimatum left the de facto government scrambling, proving that Russia could [manipulate](#) the energy crisis to extract political concessions.

Moscow has also moved to suppress independent civil society and media in Abkhazia, fearing that NGOs could become a source of resistance. The Kremlin's model—already deployed in Russia and even Georgia—was to push Abkhazia to adopt a “foreign agent” law that would brand independent organizations as tools of Western influence. Although local activists and some de facto officials resisted, Russia continued to pressure Sokhumi to restrict foreign-funded NGOs. Until today, Abkhaz [resistance](#) has yielded results and the foreign agents law still remains to be passed.

Beyond economic and political influence, Russia has expanded its military footprint in Abkhazia, reinforcing its position in the Black Sea.

Beyond economic and political influence, Russia has expanded its military footprint in Abkhazia, reinforcing its position in the Black Sea. In 2023, Moscow secured the restoration of Sokhumi's Babushera Airport, which started operating under Russian control for 49 years this year, likely serving dual civilian and military purposes. Additionally, the Kremlin [announced](#) the construction of a new naval base in Ochamchire, providing Russia with a strategic outpost that could be used to counter NATO's presence in the Black Sea and protect its maritime interests. These military expansions make it clear that Russia does not view Abkhazia merely as a protectorate but as a critical asset in

its broader positioning on the Black Sea.

Despite moments of local resistance, Abkhazia's dependence on Moscow—economically, politically, and militarily—has made opposition futile. Russia's creeping annexation has followed a pattern: economic coercion, legal harmonization, territorial absorption, and military entrenchment. The ultimate question is not whether Abkhazia will be annexed but when and how Russia will decide to formalize its control. Moscow has already laid the groundwork for full integration and unless decisive actions are taken by local forces, who despise the idea of “losing independence,” as well as Georgia and the West, the annexation of Abkhazia may only be a matter of time.

Lessons from Russian Domination in Abkhazia

Over two decades of Russian domination in Abkhazia offers several key lessons for both Georgia and Europe. Local political elites could also exploit these lessons to benefit the Abkhaz population.

1. *Russia's Hybrid Warfare Playbook Remains the Same*

What Russia did to Georgia in the 1990s and 2008, it has done on a larger scale to Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The West should have learned from Abkhazia's case that Moscow's strategy relies on gradually absorbing territories through military occupation, economic entrapment, and political manipulation.

What Russia did to Georgia in the 1990s and 2008, it has done on a larger scale to Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The West should have learned from Abkhazia's case that Moscow's strategy relies on gradually absorbing territories through military

occupation, economic entrapment, and political manipulation. Abkhazia remains a cautionary tale of what happens when the West ignores Russian expansionism. Moreover, countering Russia's disinformation, hybrid threats and even soft power matters, where possible.

In Abkhazia, the West, as well as Georgia, is portrayed as an enemy, even though in reality there are no military or belligerent objectives towards Abkhazia and the Abkhaz, either in Tbilisi or indeed in the Western capitals. Nevertheless, even independent media in Abkhazia often picks up anti-Georgian and anti-Western stories to strengthen the already present narrative of the West undermining Russian influence and Georgia being the servant of George Soros and aggressive Western liberals.

2. Western Engagement Matters

The West currently is not an actor in Abkhazia. The limited number of international partners, including the UN family in Abkhazia, is not a counterbalance to the ubiquitous presence of Russia. Russia outspends the EU and Georgia (combined) in Abkhazia 10-to-1. Most Russian money goes directly into the people's pockets, through salaries, pensions, or social projects while many goods offered by the EU, the U.S., or Georgia are intangible and not easily accessible.

In reality, people in Abkhazia want the same things as elsewhere in the world. They would love to have access to European education, travel freely around Europe, and have the same economic and financial opportunities as other Europeans have. However, a decades-long conflict has left a mark on the simple things that matter in everyday life. For instance, the Abkhaz cannot travel because their documents (for obvious reasons) are not recognized and they only have Russian passports. Currently, when Russian citizens are facing many restrictions because of Putin's war in Ukraine, the Abkhaz are placed in

the same category. So far, no one has found a status-neutral solution to open Europe for Abkhazia residents to travel.

Similarly, because of the non-recognition of education-related certificates and diplomas, the only place the Abkhaz can legitimately continue their education is Russia. However, in reality, if the EU could open its education system for Abkhazia's residents, many Abkhaz children and students would choose the European education system over the Russian one.

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The protests in 2024 showed that Russian dominance in Abkhazia is not absolute. Russia would have had less leverage if there had been an alternative for the Abkhaz regarding financial, economic, or diplomatic/political support. This reinforces the need for a more proactive European strategy towards the contested regions, whether Abkhazia or elsewhere on the European continent. It is harder to counter Russian influence where Europe and the West have little reach. Hence the lesson – increase the reach.

3. Democratic Backsliding in Georgia Weakens Its Position

Georgia's current political trajectory—marked by democratic backsliding and anti-Western rhetoric—undermines its position as a credible alternative for Abkhazia. Georgia cannot realistically compete with Russia's influence in the occupied region without a clear and committed European path. The Abkhaz already feel dominated by Moscow and some are even sick and tired from contin-

uous instructions and blackmail from the Kremlin. Mending bridges with another Moscow client gives nothing to Sokhumi. It can deal with Moscow without Tbilisi. Where Georgia could be more helpful is if it projects the European soft power and the benefits the EU can offer to the Abkhaz population. But since Georgia is negating the European path and opting for Moscow's orbit, its attractiveness for the Abkhaz decreases significantly.

4. There is No Peace Process Currently in Place

Because the conflict has been frozen for almost 30 years, there is currently no peace process between Georgia and Russia related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Geneva International Discussions, while an interesting all-inclusive format with the participation of the EU, the U.S., Russia, the UN, the OSCE, Georgia, and Abkhaz and Ossetian representatives, lacks status, interest and a level of involvement. Its agenda is limited to discussing the highly politicized issues of the non-use of force and international security arrangements, as well as humanitarian issues, including the return of displaced persons. There is no possibility for compromise on these issues as all participants have learned their talking points and see no interest in moving forward. A reinvigoration of the peace process through the higher-level engagement from the West could stimulate the parties to become more creative, especially since some benefits of European integration become accessible due to these talks. Additionally, embracing status-neutral solutions, be they foreign education, freedom of movement, or trade relations, learning from other European conflicts, such as Cyprus (or even Kosovo), could be helpful. The current approach of staying dug into the diplomatic trenches creates

only a mutually unacceptable but comfortable status-quo.

5. Annexation is a Threat that No One Except Moscow Wants

Paradoxically, even the most ardent Abkhaz nationalists, who support the Russian war in Ukraine, would agree with the nationalist Georgians and the internationalist Europeans who oppose the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that the annexation of Abkhazia by Russia is unacceptable.

Paradoxically, even the most ardent Abkhaz nationalists, who support the Russian war in Ukraine, would agree with the nationalist Georgians and the internationalist Europeans who oppose the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that the annexation of Abkhazia by Russia is unacceptable. This is not to say that the intersection of interests might spill over into other areas of mutual interest; however, on non-annexation there is a tacit agreement. This opens a small room of opportunity to find mutually beneficial areas which could strengthen the resistance of the local community in Abkhazia to looming Russian annexation. Paradoxically, again, strengthening Abkhaz institutions, a non-starter for many Georgian politicians for decades, could now be an answer to the Russian annexation threat. The reality is that if Russia decides to move with the annexation without military means, the only force that can resist it is the local Abkhaz establishment ■

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